



On the way to local integration

Good practices collected during the implementation of
the **Welcome Neighbour project. Local community
integration in Marki, Izabelin and Podkowa Leśna**
- from 31.12.2021 to 31.12.2023

Warsaw, December 2023



FUNDACJA
**Polskie
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Introduction

Welcome Neighbor! Integration of migrants in local communities was initiated even before Poles started „welcoming neighbours” on a large scale in February 2022. The unprecedented assistance to Ukrainians fleeing the war, for many consecutive months, came as a huge surprise to the refugees, but also to all of us – those who have lived in a safe Poland for a long time, since forever or for some time.

Over the past two years, more than seventy-five per cent of Poles and more than ninety per cent of Ukrainian migrants, who have already been living in our country, have become involved in helping refugees. No social project, directive or legislation could have done this. The great aid action was and still is a testimony to the fact that people want to help, are able to share, and wish to be open and generous.

The last few months have also taught us that building intercultural relationships, hosting people affected by war and loss, and overcoming stereotypes and prejudices, require not only goodwill but also concrete skills and therefore dedicated work in this respect. Finally, we have seen what a great potential of energy and a reservoir of skills, people with a migration background themselves bring with them.

The original concept of the Welcome Neighbor! Integration of migrants in local communities project was to build a meeting space for former and new residents of three towns near Warsaw. In cooperation with the municipalities of Izabelin, Podkowa Leśna and Marki, we organised events, activities, consultations and Polish language classes aimed at supporting the integration of migrants in these areas.

The outbreak of war radically changed the needs of local communities. Many new meeting places spontaneously opened up, the number of people from Ukraine increased dramatically, and many residents became actively involved in various initiatives. We were happily able to accompany the communes in their efforts to respond to the developments.

We are grateful to the authorities, to the residents of Izabelin, Podkowa Leśna and Marek for this time together. Our role was to give you tools or ideas, to accompany you, to advise you, to provide finances, because after all, the welcoming of neighbours took place in the communes. We sincerely thank you for this.

Agnieszka Kosowicz

the President of the Polish Migration Forum Foundation

1. Marki, Izabelin, Podkowa Leśna – characteristics of the communes

1.1. Marki – key information

Location and number of residents

Marki is a city located in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship, in the district of Wolomin. The area of Marki is 26 km². According to the Central Statistical Office, there are about 38,000 people living in Marki. It is estimated that the number of people living in Marki is actually higher, more than 50,000 - some residents are not registered there. Demographic forecasts estimate that by 2030 the population may increase by another 25%.

Marki is one of the fastest growing communes in the Warsaw metropolitan area. The population growth is due to new apartment buildings, which are much cheaper than in Warsaw. It is also a „young” city. According to the Central Statistical Office, the percentage of people under the age of nineteen is 26% (the national average is 20%).

The city of Marki is situated northeast of Warsaw, and it is well-connected with the capital - the border between the cities is unnoticeable. Warsaw bus lines (both daytime and night) run to Marki, providing a good transport connection, further complemented by train service.

Public institutions - education and culture

Marki has five public primary schools and one high school. In 2023, nearly 5,000 children and teenagers studied at them, and more than 75% in elementary schools. Among them, 300 children were from Ukraine.

There is also a facility for Ukrainian children in the city. It is a school complex consisting of an elementary school, a boarding school, a kindergarten and a music school, which provides access to education according to the program of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, and in cooperation with a high school in Kharkiv.

In the area of culture, the main institutions are: Marecki Ośrodek Kultury im. Tadeusza Łużyńskiego (Tadeusz Łuzynski Cultural Center) and Centrum Aktywności Fabryczna (CAF 3), which was established in 2018. It is a meeting place for the local community and NGOs. CAF 3 offers space for organizing events and different initiatives, including those aimed at the migrant community.

Activity of social entities

More than fifty NGOs are registered in Marki. Most of the activities for the migrant community are organized by Mareckie Stowarzyszenie Gospodarcze and the Open Heart Foundation (Fundacja Otwarte Serce). Because of the close cooperation between different NGOs and the local government, the activities are well-coordinated and implementation of joint projects is regularly discussed.

People involved in Mareckie Stowarzyszenie Gospodarcze also emphasize the value of cooperation with Grupa Cygan (Toyota Marki), which is actively involved in supporting local social initiatives, including those aimed at migrant communities.

Thanks to the cooperation of Grupa Cygan, Mareckie Stowarzyszenie Gospodarcze, Toyota Financial Services Poland, with support from the

Skłodowscy Tax Office, „Przystań Nadzieja” project was launched in Marki. It is a long-term temporary home for people who fled the war in Ukraine. Since April 2022, more than two hundred people have been given shelter, providing accommodation, food and support in various aspects of life. The hotel will continue to operate until March 2024 (it currently accommodates about 40 people).

Challenges of the commune

The document „Marki development strategy for 2022-2030” identifies challenges related to the development of the city, but also includes areas related to the integration of migrants (the document uses the term „refugees”, which mainly means those who came to Marki from Ukraine in 2022.)

The main goals of the city’s development identified in the study are: reducing the negative effects of urbanization and responding to its challenges, building the urbanity of Marki and identity of the city based on high quality services.

The authors of the strategy identify lines of action and assign specific interventions which support the integration of the migrant community in the city. These are:

Creating conditions for developing entrepreneurship: supporting integration of refugees into the labor market

Institutional development of the local government: taking measures to make it easier for migrants to use public services and to reduce barriers to institutional services.

Integration of the local community: carrying out activities to prevent intercultural conflicts and social exclusion, organizing events and meetings with the purpose of support and integration.

Improving the quality and efficiency of education and the attractiveness of primary and secondary education: establishing educational services for migrants that take into account their cultural identity and are free of language barriers.

Development of culture and cultural activities aimed at the residents of Marki: organizing events and activities to promote integration.

1.1.2. Migrant community in the commune

Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine

Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there was a large Ukrainian diaspora in Marki. It was largely made up of men who came here for work. A large number of them found work in the construction industry (after the war escalated, some of them returned to Ukraine to join the army). Some were also joined by their families.

Those who worked in Marki often lived in staff accommodation. Their presence was noticeable, but they did not integrate into the local community. They mostly spent time with other Ukrainians.

It is estimated that before February 24, 2022, there were about 1000-1500 people from Ukraine living in Marki. In addition, people from Belarus, Chechnya and Georgia were also present in the city, although in smaller numbers.

In March 2021, the Social Welfare Center hired a psychologist who speaks Ukrainian and Russian. This is because some of the refugees used their services, and effective measures aimed at them required communication in Ukrainian and Russian.

After February 24, 2022

From March to June 2022, the Social Welfare Center in Marki handled more than 4,000 applications for benefits for people arriving from Ukraine („one-off support payment of 300 PLN”). It is assumed that the number of people who stayed in Marki temporarily may have been even higher, about 5,500.

Some of them were able to count on the support of companies, who before the escalation of the war employed men from Ukraine who later returned to their country. Their families could come to take their place and, for example, use the staff accommodation.

A few days after the outbreak of the war, a working meeting was held, attended by representatives of the City Hall, as well as people from Mareckie Stowarzyszenie Gospodarcze. They planned the implementation of the most urgent aid activities and divided up the tasks.



They included:



Launching a warehouse with items for migrants, run by volunteers. The warehouse was used by thousands of people, including those coming from outside of Marki. The warehouse operated daily for about 3-4 months. It was also supported by local businesses.



Coordination of accommodation in private homes, carried out by volunteer Beata Brysiak, who received about 200-300 applications from people interested in hosting refugees from Ukraine at their homes. She also coordinated the communication between the hosts and the guests. Later, the Social Welfare Center regularly monitored the conditions of stay in private homes, especially where more than four people were accommodated, in an effort to ensure their safety and protect them from possible fraud attempts.



The launch of a hotel for people from Ukraine - „Przystań Nadzieja” which so far hosted more than 200 people.



Support from the Social Welfare Center team in dealing with different matters related to the stay in Poland (extra shifts, providing computers, assistance in filling out applications etc.)



Serving meals at CAF 3 (meals were provided by Caritas)



Organizing Polish language courses.

The situation at the end of 2023

Currently, it is estimated that about half of those who came to the city after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine remain in Marki. Most residents say that they are coping well with organizing their lives in a new place of residence

- they find employment, open their own businesses (such as the Kreslove Bar), and send their children to Polish schools.

There is a noticeable change in the social structure of the migrant community - there are now more families with children than independent adults, compared to the time before the war.

Companies operating in the Marki area which employ people from Ukraine often turn to entities that work with the migrant communities to find people willing to work.

1.1.3. The availability of public services and social activities for migrants

As the migrant community is large, the Social Welfare Center still employs a psychologist who helps Ukrainians deal with various issues in their language, and supports the center's work in interacting with migrant families where interpretation is needed.

The Social Welfare Center and non-governmental organizations are particularly trying to support families in difficult situations (e.g., with severe illnesses, an independent parent caring for children with disabilities or developmental disorders.) Cooperation with „Przystań Nadzieja,” for example, has made it possible to help children requiring specialist diagnostics or adults for whom treatment and physiotherapy were necessary.

Integration events such as picnics and festivals (e.g., in cooperation with the parish of Saint Isidore) aimed at the residents of Marki are organized in the area. Some of the activities are related to areas of cultural exchange. Intercultural workshops and meetings are also organized by CAF 3. A large group of migrants takes part in them.

According to people from the Social Welfare Center and different NGOs, the commune of Marki is open to accepting and supporting migrants. Both

the mayor and councilors are supportive of various activities, and their implementation is possible because of the good communication between institutions and social entities.

1.2.1. Izabelin – key information

Location and number of residents

Izabelin is a rural commune located in the Mazovian Voivodeship, in the Warsaw West county. The area of the commune is divided into seven village administrator's offices, including Izabelin B (over 3 thousand people), Izabelin C (about 2 thousand people), and Mościska (over 1.6 thousand people). The commune's territory is mostly forested (Kampinos National Park), with the remaining area covered by arable land, meadows and pastures.

Izabelin is 20 kilometres away from Warsaw and is well connected with the capital. Due to its scenic qualities – being surrounded by forest, as well as convenient access to Warsaw – the villages located in its area are regarded as attractive places to live.

According to the Central Statistical Office (CSO) data as of 30.06.2022, the commune has a population of 10,824 people. The population density is 261 persons per km².

Public institutions - education and culture

Izabelin commune is the lead authority for the only public primary school (The Colonel Stanisław Królicki Primary School). The facility takes up two buildings – one for grades 1-3 and the other for grades 4-8 – and has over 800 pupils.

The commune also has the St. Maximilian Special School for the Blind in Laski (as part of the Rosa Czacka School and Educational Centre for Blind Children run by the Society for the Care of the Blind).

In Izabelin, there is the Izabelin Cultural Centre, which has a modern, multi-purpose auditorium and concert hall where concerts, exhibitions and theatre performances are held. It is also equipped with dedicated studios for themed classes. The Cultural Center building also offers a public cafe space, located on the ground floor of the building.

In the immediate vicinity of the Cultural Centre at 25 Matejki Street, Villa Europa is situated, a building available to the commune. It hosts, among other initiatives, the Clothes Exchange, a social initiative to share clothes and other products. The building's space is also lent out to other social projects: it is used, for example, by a group of migrants who hold their meetings there. In 2022, Villa Europa was an information centre for people arriving from Ukraine and also served as temporary accommodation for several families.

1.2.2. Activities of social actors

There are almost 30 registered NGOs in the commune. In the context of local activities for the migrant community, especially in the period immediately after the escalation of the war in Ukraine in 2022, the Father Aleksander Fedorowicz Foundation „Friends of Ali” and the 424 Association of Scout and Cub Scout Groups „Kampinos” were active. The Polish Migration Forum Foundation is also registered in the commune, but it has its headquarters in Warsaw and mostly runs its activities there.

1.2.3. Commune challenges

The Development Strategy of Izabelin Commune for 2022-2030 is to implement the vision of creating a place that gives a sense of community to all inhabitants. The most important areas of development are: building a sense of community, creating a safe and friendly space, and taking care of the balance between the natural environment and infrastructure.

Challenges indicated by the inhabitants of the commune in 2020 include issues related to public transport – the availability of collective transport

for commuting to Warsaw, the need to invest in road infrastructure, the underdeveloped cycling routes network, the spatial and functional diversity of individual villages, and not always satisfactory access to public services (nurseries, health care).

1.2.4. Migrant community in the commune

The background situation prior to the escalation of the war in Ukraine

The migrant community in Izabelin is predominantly Ukrainian. Before 2022, they were mainly economic migrants. Many households in Izabelin benefited from domestic help or care services provided by Ukrainian women. People from Ukraine were also engaged in gardening, renovation and construction work.

There were also so-called workers' quarters in Izabelin, where some Ukrainians rented rooms. Some of them used to commute from other towns. Before 2022, there were several Ukrainian children at the school.

It can be estimated that there were around 300 people living in the Izabelin area before the escalation of war, most of them adults who came to Poland without their families.

Even before the escalation of war in Ukraine in 2022 – with a goal of creating an opportunity for the Polish and migrant communities to get to know each other better – the commune organised a Ukrainian evening, an integration event with cooking and dancing. Only a few people attended, which may have been due to concerns about the possible consequences of revealing their residency (among those who were not registered in the commune).

The background situation after 24 February 2022

It is estimated that up to 800 people from Ukraine were temporarily living in Izabelin in 2022; most of them found accommodation in private households. Refugees were arriving within the first few days of the beginning of the full-

scale war, and the commune began to prepare for their reception from the very first day, setting up an emergency staff to coordinate relief efforts and the distribution of tasks among those involved in organising assistance.

Two collective accommodation points were organised in Izabelin – one in Villa Europa, where information meetings were also held for people arriving, and the other in what is known as Laski (a facility with guest rooms). The point in Laski is still in use today - it currently hosts families with children with disabilities who receive support from the School and Educational Centre for Blind Children in Laski.

A number of activities were organised for Ukrainians, including:



An information centre in Villa Europa, where information meetings were organised and leaflets in Ukrainian were distributed. People who had arrived from Ukraine earlier were also involved in the centre's activities and were able to provide support to new arrivals.



The collection of clothing and any other items needed – a point for receiving and distributing donations operated for several months.



The involvement (initially in the form of voluntary work and later on the basis of employment) of a person from Ukraine, who acted as an informant and guide in the organisation of life in Poland, as well as helping with Polish-Ukrainian translations. She worked for over a year at the Izabelin Cultural Centre, where she was available four hours a day. In mid-2023, she finished her work and returned to Ukraine.



Polish language courses for adults and youth.



Free of charge complimentary offer from the Izabelin Cultural Centre, including events related to Ukrainian national holidays, Christmas and Easter celebrations.



Semi-Care Camps for Ukrainian children – summer 2022 and winter 2023 – organised by the Izabelin Cultural Centre.



Providing Willa Europa's space for the migrant community – it was used, among others, by a group of Pentecostals who met weekly, during the period when members of this community lived in Izabelin.

In addition to activities addressed to people arriving in Izabelin, collections of donations and financial resources were also conducted and transferred to Ukraine. Both the commune, the school and the parish maintain contacts with their partners in Ukraine, which facilitated the coordination of activities.

In addition to the commune and the Izabelin Cultural Centre, the Father Aleksander Fedorowicz Foundation “Friends of Ali” and the 424 Association of Scout and Cub Scout Groups „Kampinos” were actively involved in the activities.

The Ukrainian community, being thankful for the way it was received in the commune, organised a social action – cleaning up public spaces, as well as a picnic in the forest, which was recognised by the inhabitants of Izabelin.

In 2022, up to 80-85 children from Ukraine were temporarily studying at the school in Izabelin. The school employed two cultural assistants – each for 20 hours per week (one worked in the building with children in grades 1-3, the other in the part of the school for grades 4-8). In addition, a cultural assistant employed by the **‘Welcome Neighbour’** project also worked at the school 10 hours per week. She supported both the children studying at the school and the parents who came to her with various questions, also related to the organisation of life and everyday matters such as healthcare facilities or administrative issues.

Ukrainian children were able to enjoy cost-free meals at school, received school kits (funded by the parents of children studying at the school as part

of a fundraiser), and benefited from subsidised school trips.

Intercultural workshops (for all pupils), students' individual initiatives related to cultural exchange (e.g. Ukrainian Day), and workshops for Ukrainian children (strengthening and aiming to integrate this group) were also implemented at school.

The background situation at the end of 2023

Most of the people who arrived in Izabelin after 24 February 2022 have already left. Some of them have returned to Ukraine, while others have chosen other directions of emigration.

The number of Ukrainians currently living in Izabelin is estimated at around 200. Around 40 children attend primary school (before 2022 it was a few children), which means that the demographic characteristics of this group have changed: from a predominance of adults arriving on their own – to families with children (mostly mothers with children). Some of them declare their willingness to stay in Poland permanently.

The presence of people from Ukraine is noticeable in the public space – they work in trade and services, and you can hear the Ukrainian language in public places. The migrant community stays in contact with each other through online tools (forums, groups). Parents of children studying at the school also have their own online channels, which are used to share information related to the organisation of the school's work.

A group of about 30 women from Ukraine regularly meets in Izabelin – they have the opportunity to meet in the spaces of Villa Europa. The meetings have a social character.

1.2.5. Accessibility of public services and social activities for migrants

The effective implementation of activities for migrants in the first period after the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine was possible thanks to successful cooperation and communication between people representing various institutions in the commune (e.g. the school, the cultural centre and social organisations). The ongoing exchange of information allowed the needs of those who arrived in Izabelin to be addressed efficiently. Refugees were able to benefit from the support of a person employed at the Izabelin Cultural Centre and an intercultural assistant at school.

The school in Izabelin plans to continue working with an intercultural assistant, who will continue to support migrant children and ensure good relations and communication between the school and the children's parents.



Organisational arrangements are being made for the continuation of free Polish language lessons. In addition, the possibility of re-organising Ukrainian language classes for Ukrainian children is being considered (in 2022, such classes were held for several months at the Izabelin Cultural Centre).

According to the residents of Izabelin, the people who have stayed in the commune have, for the most part, already organised their lives locally and taken up employment, so they do not need support on the same scale as immediately after their arrival.

1.3.1. Podkowa Leśna – key information

Location and number of residents

Podkowa Leśna is located in the Grodzisk district, in the Warsaw agglomeration. It is one of the first garden cities in Poland, founded in 1925. The area of the commune is 10.1 km², of which about 60% is covered by forest (Młochowski Forest), 30% is built-up area (mainly the town of Podkowa Leśna) and the remaining 10% consists of agricultural land, grassland and roads.

More than 3,600 people live here. The actual population density (not including the forest area) is estimated to be around 900 people per square kilometre.

Podkowa Leśna is only twenty kilometres from the centre of Warsaw. It takes from forty minutes to over an hour to get there by car one way, depending on traffic. There is also a WKD train, which provides convenient and fast access to the centre of the capital city.

Podkowa Leśna is perceived as a very good, but at the same time expensive place to live - due to the high property prices. The town is known for its rich history and appealing location to the nearby forest, which provides a favourable microclimate and beautiful views. There are many historic

villas, parks and gardens. In recent years, a number of restaurants have also sprung up, attracting visitors to the town for leisure activities.

Public institutions - education and culture

There are two primary schools in the Podkowa Leśna area: the public Bohaterów Warszawy Primary School, the non-public Primary School No. 2 and the Podkowa Leśna High School No. 60.

In the public primary school there are about five hundred children in grades 1-8. There is also a kindergarten unit with thirty children attending it. At the same time, it is also a district institution for the centre for foreigners in Podkowa Leśna-Dębak (run by the Office for Foreigners), which has been operating since the beginning of the 1990s. This means that the school - which has been working for years to integrate the youngest people with a migration background - is obliged to accept school-age children living there.

In the 2021/22 school year - due to the arrival of many families from Afghanistan - the school opened three preparatory classes (for grades 1-3, 4-6 and 7-8), while in 2022 it welcomed around fifty children from Ukraine.

The town hosts the Centre for Culture and Civic Initiatives, whose mission is to strengthen the local community: it inspires, supports grassroots activities and cultural education of Podkowa's residents so that they consciously participate in culture and co-create their 'little homeland'. The Centre has two buildings at its disposal and is run by a team of ten people. In addition to its own range of activities, the Centre also supports the initiatives of its residents and cooperates with different entities and organisations that offer their activities, including the migrant community.

Activities of social actors

There are about sixty registered NGOs in the commune. Among them, there are none that are actively working for the migrant community

at the moment, which may also be due to the fact that this community is not very big.

Challenges for the commune

For several years, the attention of Podkowa residents has been drawn to the discussion concerning the revitalisation of the pond in the Town Park and the Linden Avenue (Aleja Lipowa). Plans for the modernisation project have been undermined by an environmental organisation, and the continuing conflict is absorbing the attention of Podkowa residents.

In addition, people living in the town have long been noticing changes in its landscape due to new investments, including multi-family developments - which is not always well received. This is not always welcomed, as some residents feel that such developments interfere too much with the existing character of the town (quiet, suburban villa area).

However, the influx of newcomers to the town, although quite dynamic in recent years, has not translated into integration into the local community. Activists and activists note that their proposals do not attract young migrants as well as other new residents of Podkowa. Involving them in active local activities is perceived as a major challenge.

1.3.2. Migrant community in the commune

Situation before the start of war in Ukraine

The Podkowa Leśna-Dębak centre for foreigners has been operating in the commune since 1992. The facility has the capacity to accommodate two hundred and fifty people. At the moment, it serves as a residence centre (where people stay throughout the refugee status procedure) and a reception centre (where people stay only during the first stage of the procedure). For the former, one of the buildings has been set aside exclusively for women and children.

At Dębak, afternoon school classes are organised three times a week, where children receive educational support. Among other things, they can receive help from a teacher with their homework or revise material. The centre's school operates thanks to the Office for Foreigners. There is also a kindergarten for children up to the age of six, as well as a public computer room and a library.

In 2022, one hundred and seventy-two people awaiting international protection arrived at the centre. These were nationals and citizens of Belarus, Ukraine, Iraq, Chechnya, Uganda, Somalia, Rwanda, Guinea, Eritrea, Russia, Tajikistan, Ingushetia and Kazakhstan.

The centre in Dębak is about 5 km from the centre of Podkowa Leśna, but there is no public transport connection to it. People living in the centre are therefore not visible in the city space.

Before Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022, there was (apart from the centre for foreigners) no large population of people with a migration background in Podkowa Leśna. It was mainly inhabited by people who came to Poland for economic reasons (they worked largely as domestic help, in construction industry and gardening), single people who settled in the commune after moving out of the centre in Dębak, such as citizens and nationals of Kyrgyzstan or Ukraine, and people who were in relationships with partners of Polish origin, arriving from e.g. the USA, Spain or the Netherlands.

The situation after February, 24 2022

Following Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the commune of Podkowa Leśna became actively involved in providing aid to Ukrainian citizens. Many aid activities were implemented, including:



Donations were collected and a donation distribution centre (later transformed into a free-shop) was organised;



People from Ukraine were hosted in private homes - it is estimated that more than six hundred people were temporarily accommodated in the commune;



Polish language classes were conducted (in the form of voluntary work) - in the Podkowa High School and the Centre for Culture and Civic Initiatives;



Children were enrolled in primary schools: the public school enrolled more than fifty Ukrainian children and young people, while the community school enrolled eighteen pupils; nine children were enrolled in the kindergarten;



A day-care centre for Ukrainian children was launched at the Centre for Culture and Civic Initiatives (Ukrainian women who had already lived in Podkowa Leśna volunteered in the local activities). Psychological consultations for people fleeing war were also launched and several events addressed to the migrant community were organised - including activities for children, a charity concert and a Ukrainian Traces Walk in Podkowa Leśna;



An International Easter Meeting was organised in the meadow by the Kasyno Palace on Easter Saturday, 16 April 2022. The aim of the event was to integrate the community of Podkowa Leśna and guests from Ukraine;



A summer holiday trip was organised for a group of thirty-one children from the Ukraine, who stayed in Podkowa Leśna, as well as several day trips to various places in Poland.

The commune also organised humanitarian aid shipments to Ukraine (medical equipment, hygiene products, food) and fundraising. The funds raised were used for education and nutrition for the children, grocery shopping and other urgent needs.

The city established cooperation with Dutch local authorities and NGOs there. The results of this cooperation were:



Donation transports from the Netherlands and four organised trips (for two hundred people) around Amsterdam, The Hague, Breda and Maastricht, where people from Ukraine received accommodation, medical, psychological and social care, education and access to the labour market



Individually organised onward travel for those requiring specialised medical care

Situation at the end of 2023

In the perception of the town's residents, the situation, in terms of the presence of migrants in the commune, has reverted to what it was before the first half of 2022. Most of the war refugees who ended up in Podkowa stayed in the commune temporarily and then moved somewhere else or returned to Ukraine.

Migrants who still live in the commune, but outside the foreigners' centre, are noticeable in the city space. Some of them commute to Warsaw for work and some find employment locally. This is not a very large group, also due to the fact that the commune is dominated by single-family buildings, so there are not enough flats for these people to rent.

1.3.3. Accessibility of public services and social activities for migrants

Podkowa Leśna doesn't carry out many activities for the residents with a migration background. Prior to Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022, such initiatives were rather rare, although it is worth mentioning that there were attempts to involve children from refugee backgrounds in the center's ongoing activities.

The City Council has made information available on its website (in Polish and Ukrainian) about the rules for issuing documents and assigning a PESEL number to people from Ukraine, and in 2022 the commune created a Temporary Resident Card for citizens from Ukraine - granted to each registered family (the card entitled them to discount, e.g. free participation in gymnastics, classes and events of the Cultural Centre. Holders of the Temporary Resident's Card could also use the Warsaw Commuter Railway (WKD) for free within the boundaries of the City of Podkowa Leśna).



Ongoing and long-standing activities for children with a migration background are carried out at Bohaterów Warszawy Primary School, as shown by the amount of projects of an intercultural character in which the school is involved.

In 2022, a volunteer from Ukraine cooperated with the Center and successfully reached out to migrants residing in the city with relevant information. Thanks to her support, it was possible to invite this group to participate in several meetings and workshops. After the volunteer's departure, direct contact with the migrant community became more difficult, and it is not easy to ensure that they take advantage of the Center's range of activities, although the venue remains open to them. The day care centre for Ukrainian children was also discontinued due to low interest.



Dalia Mikulska

She was a fashion designer in Ukraine. She now lives in Izabelin and works at the Cultural Centre.

The story of Juliana from Lviv.

A month ago, two elderly women from Kherson arrived with seven children, the youngest of whom was 5 years old and the oldest 15 years old, says Mrs. Juliana from Lviv. - The parents of these children stayed in Ukraine, because men under 60 are not allowed to leave, and their wives didn't want to abandon them. And here the support has already ended, the state no longer gives money to people who host Ukrainians, and you have to pay for rent normally. And how am

I supposed to help them? I said: you need to go to Germany. What will they do here to provide financially for all these children?*



A little bit like Singapore

Ms. Juliana arrived in Poland on February 24, the day Russia invaded Ukraine. She was persuaded to leave by her daughter.

Of course no one expected the war to break out. My daughter is a doctoral student in social sciences at a university in Sweden. She specialises in Eastern European conflicts, and her PhD was on the 2014 war in Donbass. And she was telling me 3 months earlier: „Mom, there will be a war.” She

asked me to be prepared, to keep the car tanked at all times. No one wanted to believe in such things, but she prepared us for that mentally.

She asked us to leave right away, on the same day. Because we have no family in Ukraine. If the borders were closed, if there was a new Iron Curtain, we would have been left alone.

We left on the same day, even before the queues of cars started lining up at the border. At six o'clock in the morning a friend from Kharkiv called me and we started packing. I don't know what I was thinking at the time - I guess I was afraid that Poland wouldn't let us in, because I took some tablecloths, bed sheets and almost no clothes. And only one pair of underwear. It was a shock. Everyone thought it would end quickly, and then terrible things started to happen.

We came to Izabelin because my mother has a sister here who used to work in the Kampinos National Park. So, where were we supposed to go?

To the family!

Also, I speak Polish because my mum's whole family moved to Poland years ago and I have been visiting them since I was a child. So I think it was easier for me than for people who came from Kharkov or Kryvyi Rih, and only know Russian and have never been abroad. For them Poland is a bit like Singapore for me, a completely foreign place, a foreign language.

Mum moved in with her sister to a 20-square-metre studio apartment, and we were accommodated by the Kampinos management in their staff hotel. We were able to live there for free until August last year. That was very helpful. After that we were already earning money and could pay for the accommodation.



We were ashamed to just take

On the third day after arriving, I signed up to volunteer. I was immediately carried by emotions, I couldn't sit still. I saw that people were getting

organised and helping out, so I started to do that as well.

In the beginning, it was a huge amount of help - from diapers to groceries. People brought not only basic products, but also fancy ones, such as coconut milk. It was hardly the case that anyone demanded anything - in our country, people are not used to the state or any organisation looking after them. So the Ukrainians were very grateful.

But you know how it is - if something is for free, many people are willing to take it. The Polish volunteers were embarrassed to say anything, because they were refugees, but I could, so I said: after all, you took five cartons of milk yesterday, why do you need so much?

On the other hand, I also remember a woman who never took anything, even though I know she has two children and is in need. I said to her: take it, after all, people share it from a sincere heart, and you are in need. She said she never wanted to take anything from anyone. I packed her a whole bag and she burst into tears. She was tearful because she had always worked and been independent, and now suddenly she was relying on help from others.

I had a bit of a similar experience. While volunteering, I worked in the warehouse, unpacking donations. But I felt ashamed to take them myself. Once a colleague said to me: 'Listen, don't you want to take something? At least take some butter! I felt so stupid, even though the truth is that at that time we weren't earning any money, we were fed by my aunt, a pensioner who lived on a modest pension.'

It was difficult for us at the beginning, but the director of the Cultural Centre in Izabelin noticed me and thought I would be useful, as I speak Polish, Ukrainian and Russian. They needed someone to coordinate activities and contact the newly arrived Ukrainians. Because people were coming to the commune for help and the Polish workers could not communicate with them.

In Ukraine I had my own business, I was a fashion designer, and here, in Izabelin, I was the aid coordinator. My husband, on the other hand, is

a ceramicist, he also got a job at the Cultural Centre, he runs workshops there. Poles come to these workshops. Unfortunately, my husband doesn't speak Polish, it's hard for him to learn it. But somehow they get along, a little by using gestures and a little in our language.

There was a lot of work throughout the year, a lot of projects for Ukrainian refugees - learning Polish, trips for the children to have some fun moments. The children... It's something amazing how quickly they picked up the language. Although there were some who couldn't. They stayed at home because they couldn't cope with the traumatic experiences. They cried because they remembered the bombings and those horrible basements where they had to hide. Only now do I see how they have gotten a new life, how they have integrated with the Polish children.

I was shocked at how much the commune did for refugees! There were constantly some grants, from Germany, from the European Union. Now it's all slowly coming to an end. People have somehow got back on their feet. Or they have left.



Returns

Sometimes Poles say about Ukrainians that they came with good cars, live in expensive hotels, go to restaurants.... And I think to myself - even if there are such people, so what? If they spend money here, Poland only benefits from it!

One lady came here wearing a mink coat. She looked funny, but she only had this mink coat, she didn't even have any documents, because they destroyed their house, they lost everything they had. She took maybe one suitcase and came like that with her daughter. She told me later that she had a huge warehouse in Ukraine, everything collapsed and she had loans. She was in a terrible mental state.

About 500 refugees from Ukraine came to Izabelin. Now there are 200, maybe 150 people left. The rest have gone further away, to the West, or

have returned home. They have flats there, for which they are still paying rent, or repaying loans, and after all, you have to pay here as well. When the 40+, the government's subsidy programme for Poles who took in Ukrainians refugees, came to an end, there was a choice - either return home or go live on the street. Those who have children will still get the 500+ programme, but will that be enough to live? And it's not so easy for a single mother with children to go to work.* Besides, it is not easy to find manual labour. And most can only dream of another job, even if they were teachers, accountants, lawyers or journalists. Not everyone is physically able to work as they have sat in an office all their lives. Maybe they will learn, but it also takes physical strength and skills.

I think the hardest thing is for people who have to mop floors, even though they have a professional background - such as an accountant or a lawyer. What is she supposed to do here? The law is different, she doesn't know the language. They have managed to learn a bit of Polish for a year, but not enough to work in the profession.

Some of them went to Germany, France or Canada. These countries already have experience with refugees, not Ukrainian refugees, but different ones, and they simply transferred money from one budget to another, and you could get help right away. I got 300 PLN from the Polish State when I arrived. And nothing more, and I pay a lot of taxes here. The rest is help from goodwill people and NGOs. In the West, it is compulsory for refugees to learn the language and they do not have to work at the beginning, because they get support from the State. They are mainly younger women - under 50.

To be honest, I urge everyone to leave Poland, because it's hard here if you don't know the language. It's not easy to find a job, to make a basic living. But people were afraid to go further, they preferred to be close to the border. Most are thinking of going back, they are just waiting for this war to end.

Have I thought about leaving to live with my daughter? I was considering it. There, we would have a flat, some money from the State, but the problem is that we would be isolated because we don't speak English. We would

only have her. I wouldn't be able to stand it. Here I have a job, lots of friends. It's not about living off the State and sitting in an isolated flat. It's always good to work, to get out. Because you don't get enough money to go to the theatre, for example.



Only sometimes will someone bring up Volhynia

I decided to return to Lviv. My whole life is there - friends, acquaintances. A lot of people stayed because someone has a son and doesn't want to leave him. We only have a daughter abroad and my husband is in his 60s, so we were able to leave.

If I was 40, maybe I would stay in Poland, because I'm fine here. I've fallen in love with Warsaw. I've made a lot of friends here, people have been so wonderful to me that it brings tears to my eyes. The Poles I met during my volunteering invited me to their children's communions. Someone helped us find a flat, someone helped with the laundry. The flat we rent is very small and there is no washing machine. So I asked a lady in Izabelin if I could wash our laundry at the retirement centre. The other day the councillor called me and said: „What do you mean, you don't have a washing machine? You can wash at my place!“. Three more people called me with a similar proposal. But I felt uncomfortable doing laundry at someone else's place. I preferred to do it at the retirement centre, because it's an institution. And the director accepted my request.

We wondered how to repay them, but they wouldn't even accept chocolates from us. So we came up with an idea: my husband would give painting classes to the elderly. Do you know what joy it brings to these elderly people?

What are Poles like towards Ukrainians? Mostly very good. Of course, there have also been negative situations - someone has been treated unkindly, someone hasn't been paid for work. Sometimes I am also reminded of Volhynia, although maybe not out of any spite, maybe they are just curious what my answer will be? I also once heard from a woman that we don't know what kind of war this is. Maybe the Ukrainians are attacking themselves? For me it was like a slap in the face. I burst into tears.

The more ordinary people, the poorer they are, probably the more reason they have to look for blame, and they would sometimes blame their situation on refugees. This is normal and happens everywhere. It's just the way it is, people sometimes have to think badly of someone in order to make things better for themselves.

But for the most part people are so helpful it brings tears to my eyes. When I said I was leaving, many people tried to convince me to stay. „What do you mean, with your health condition?“, they ask me. Because I had a heart attack here. Luckily, I quickly noticed the worrying symptoms and went to the hospital. The doctors reacted quickly and managed to keep my heart intact.



The guilt

There was also one girl who the landlord threw out of the house at night with a small child, Ms Juliana recalls. - Because people are different - he probably got drunk and all his anger poured out of him. Besides, it wasn't easy for many people when they lived with strangers, at someone else's mercy. One walks around tensed all the time, feeling some kind of pressure and fear of what will happen tomorrow.

I think it's great that people have welcomed refugees into their homes. I don't know how I would feel about it, no matter what kind of person it is. After all, everyone has their own habits, someone will put something differently or leave dirty plates. Little things like that, but people could get tired. Even my mother moved back after a while, even though she was living with her own sister. They didn't make it long in the small studio apartment - it's difficult to live together in such a small space. And now in the Ukraine, my mum wakes up twice a day when she hears the bomb alarm, hides between the thicker walls and prays there that nothing happens. If I had to wake up like that every night, I think I'd go crazy.

Compared to what is happening in the East, there is not such a terrible situation in Lviv. But there are alarms, there are bombings. People live in

tension. And I live in peace, and that somehow makes me feel so anxious. As long as there was this job, there were a lot of Ukrainians in Izabelin, it somehow motivated me, I felt I was here for something. But now the projects are coming to an end and I sometimes think to myself - why am I here? I've decided to leave at the end of the summer, when my employment contract ends. Only tonight they bombed Lviv again, in the city centre, near my house someone's windows blew out. And I'm a bit scared.

My daughter asks me, "why do you want to go back so much?". So I started thinking about it and I think it's probably because of the guilt.

I am very comfortable here. And I guess it's because I'm so comfortable here that sometimes something hurts me, I feel some kind of guilt inside that others are suffering and I'm safe.**

*People with a PESEL number still have the right to benefit from the Polish social assistance system, open access to the labour market, public health care and the education system.

** The interview was conducted in June 2023. Ms Juliana no longer lives in Poland. She has returned to Ukraine.

2. About the project activities

The '**Welcome Neighbour! Local community integration**' project ran from December 2021 to December 2023. It was a joint initiative of the Polish Migration Forum Foundation, the Freedom Foundation and the municipalities of Marki, Izabelin and Podkowa Leśna.

The project included, among others:



Informational meetings for migrants combined with individual consultations

For local residents, we organised meetings with a lawyer and integration advisors on issues related to, among other things, legalisation of residence, legal conditions of temporary guardianship, assigning a PESEL number, employment rules, school and kindergarten enrolment, and car registration. We also organised meetings with a psychologist for parents of students to discuss how to support their children's learning at a new school.

In each of the communes, we also organised meetings on setting up and running a business, which were led by Khedi Alieva, a refugee from Chechnya who runs the social enterprise Kobiety Wędrownie. There were also meetings on educational development opportunities in Poland, as well as informational meetings combined with art workshops, which also had an important integrative and empowering value for migrants living in the communes.



Multicultural School

This project is dedicated to the school community: teachers, management, students, and parents.

As part of the project, intercultural assistants accompanied the participants at school, where they helped with studying, homework, making friends, resolving conflicts, attended parents' meetings, facilitated communication between teachers and parents as well as children and teenagers, organised integration events, workshops, picnics, outings and parties. They often offered advice on everyday matters. Due to their shared language and similar experiences, parents turned to the assistants for guidance when they had to fill in administrative forms, make doctor's appointments or ask where to find specialised support in Poland.

People working as assistants were present in all three schools involved in the project: Primary School in Marki, Primary School in Izabelin and the Primary School in Podkowa Leśna. Over time, due to the needs of the community, we decided that the assistantship in Podkowa Leśna will have a more community-based character and will expand its scope to issues not exclusively related to the school.

The project also included training courses for teaching staff and intercultural workshops for pupils. The training courses covered topics such as psychological first aid, promoting multilingualism, working with a multicultural class, learning Polish as a foreign language and how to support this learning, as well as how to teach and assess people with a migration background at school.

One training session lasted two days and was attended by teachers from all three schools involved in the project. Its purpose was to enable the schools to exchange experiences and establish inter-school relationships. Part of the training was dedicated to creating and implementing a school strategy to support diversity. Participants received support and advice on how to develop such a strategy in the school community.

We organised workshops for students in all three schools. They were aimed at helping them develop relationships and build an openness to diversity and the topics of migration and refugees. The workshops were based on scenarios developed at the beginning of the project, which are available on the project website and the website of the Polish Migration Forum.

In response to a request from one of the schools, we organised integration workshops for Ukrainian pupils, divided into three age groups. They were conducted in Ukrainian by a psychologist from the Polish Migration Forum Foundation. The workshops were intended to help children and teenagers from Ukraine get to know each other better and recognise that they can also support each other.

The meetings with the psychologist for young people focused on integration and the changes that young people experience in their bodies and emotions, as well as in relation to migration to Poland. After these activities, we received a lot of positive feedback.



Integration through sport. Multicultural sports picnics and training for sports activists

The Foundation for Freedom, in cooperation with the communes, local community centres and schools, organised three multicultural picnics in Marki, Izabelin and Podkowa Leśna. The picnics were an opportunity for all residents of the communes to meet, have fun together and strengthen their relationships. The team of the Polish Migration Forum Foundation captured the picnic integration by making a film that can be seen on the project website (www.witamsasiada.pl).

The Foundation for Freedom also conducted training sessions for local sports activists in each of the communes. The aim of the training was to present working methods that use sports activities and at the same time promote integration of the local community. Each of the communes also carried out its own activities for local integration, such as picnics, meetings,

festivals and concerts.

Każda z gmin zrealizowała też na rzecz integracji lokalnej własne działania według swojego pomysłu: pikniki, spotkania, festyny i koncerty.



Social campaign

The project included a social campaign called Hello Neighbour!. The aim of the campaign was to raise awareness among all residents of the communes about the presence of migrants in the public space, as well as to show the involvement of migrants in building the local community, their work and initiatives. The campaign included media articles about female migrant residents from each of the municipalities and an audio-video report about integration picnics with the participation of the migrant community.



Polish language courses for migrants

The Polish Migration Forum organised Polish language courses. The courses took place in the Izabelin Cultural Centre and in the Centre for Culture and Civic Initiatives in Podkowa Leśna. They were not only used to learn the Polish language, but also to meet, exchange information and provide mutual support to migrants.



Local integration initiatives and training for local government employees, teams of local organisations, cultural institutions, and leaders

The training sessions were aimed at improving professional skills in the area of intercultural communication and diversity management. The workshops on psychological first aid, working with foreign clients and methods and tools for effective integration of a multicultural local community were also very popular.



Networking events

A valuable part of the project for us were the workshops for project partners and representatives of the communes, local government employees, schools, community centres, long-term accommodation centres for foreigners, social welfare centres and representatives of the Office for Foreigners, including the centres in Linin and Dębak.

The meetings were aimed at exchanging experiences, knowledge and good practices that have proven successful in various communes. Participants also discussed the challenges of migrant integration and the scope of support and conditions necessary to implement inclusive measures.



Report on each commune

We have prepared a report on the communes of Izabelin, Marki and Podkowa Leśna. The report was based on existing information and documents as well as interviews with local residents. The aim was to gain a better understanding of the specific characteristics of the three communes involved in the project, the current situation and the approach to migrant integration.



Institutional development of the Polish Migration Forum

We want to provide the highest level of support, which is why we are constantly learning and changing. Each activity is a new experience and a new piece of knowledge that develops our perspective and competences. The **Welcome Neighbour!** project supported the creation of a new development strategy and structure for the Polish Migration Forum. In the course of our activities, we met with experts in organisational development and strategy building. In addition, our team underwent many trainings: psychologists were trained in therapeutic work with trauma survivors, and those working directly with clients underwent first aid training. We also organised an Excel course.

Networking is a very important part of our work. We exchange knowledge and experiences, and talk about our current activities and challenges. We want to know what other organisations and institutions are doing so that we do not duplicate activities, can respond as effectively as possible to current needs and actively react to emerging challenges. Networking also helps to develop and maintain labour standards, mutual learning, capacity building and coalitions, as well as mutual support. It also facilitates adapting to changing realities.

We are actively involved in the NGO Forum Razem – Agnieszka Kosowicz (President of the PFM Foundation) is a member of the Forum Advisory Group and co-chair of the partnerships working group. We co-create the Coalition for Strengthening the Role of Intercultural and Roma Assistants. We participate in regular Heads of Agency Meetings – a network of heads of large organisations involved in helping refugees in Poland run by the UNHCR. The Polish Migration Forum Foundation is also part of AWON – A World of Neighbours – a European network of organisations working for migrants in Europe, as well as the European Network of Migrant Women (ENoMW). Agnieszka



Kosowicz is also the co-chair of the board of the Migration Consortium, a formal network of nine leading organisations supporting migrants in Poland. She was also a member of the Expert Team for the Social Inclusion Strategy under the Minister – Member of the Council of Ministers Agnieszka Ścigaj from September 2021 to June 2022 (the group has already completed its work).



Dalia Mikulska

**Refugee procedure –
a time of exclusion.**

The story of Elmira Abasbekova

**„Someone once asked me
how I felt there”,** says Elmira
about life in the refugee
center.

**„I tell people that it’s a bit
like being on a train that
goes in circles. People
get on and off, I have to
stay on it, and I don’t even
know how long.”**

Exclusion

Poland is now her home,
her new motherland. It

took about three years for her to feel at home after leaving the center for foreigners. As for integration, the time spent at the center was rather wasted. There were some activities run by different NGOs, such as kindergarten for children and Polish language courses, a computer room and a library, but since the center is located in a forest, you could only integrate with squirrels.

Elmira first arrived at the center for women and children at Księżnej Anny

street in Warsaw, and after six months, when her husband joined her, the whole family settled in Debak. The Debak center for foreigners is located in a forest between Nadarzyn and Otrębusy. It's an open center, so refugees are allowed to leave. They are even entitled to a free ticket to Warsaw, but the nearest bus stop is three kilometers away. That's a 40-minute walk. You can take a taxi, but you have to pay for it, which many can't afford.

The refugee procedure is a time of exclusion. There are almost no opportunities to integrate into Polish society. Not many people can afford to live outside the center. A single person who decides to do so will only receive 750 PLN. For families, the benefits are even lower - 375 PLN per person. So if Elmira and her husband decided to live outside the center together with their three sons, they would get 1875 PLN a month. No matter how modestly you live, this amount is not enough to support a family of five. And they couldn't work at first - one can only apply for a work permit after six months in the refugee procedure.

As residents of the center for foreigners, Elmira and her family received 70 PLN per person per month for living expenses (20 PLN for hygiene products and 50 PLN of pocket money). They were granted food, but the children were excluded from it because they went to school during the day, so they received an equivalent of 9 PLN per day.

We came here between winter and spring. We had to buy new clothes. But with what?

Elmira remembers people who were deported from Germany in underwear and handcuffs because they resisted deportation.

For example, someone had already lived in Germany for 19 years, worked as a chef, and had a life there. Deportations are often tragic stories of divided families. Authorities may arrive at night, and they don't give you time to pack. And then you have to go

to the city and buy clothes, toiletries, toilet paper, and maybe cigarettes with just 70 PLN.



Like a ball

„The people at the center were diverse,” says Elmira. “Not everyone saw their children’s education as a priority. Some felt that everything was temporary. It was unclear whether they would stay there or be deported. This scared me too, because according to some statistics that I saw, only 3% of applications are granted.”

There were some very well-educated people at the center, for example, a professor from Harvard. There were doctors. Their only fault is that they are from countries like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. And people who are used to working are going crazy without it.

I wouldn’t waste people’s potential like that. I would let them work, maybe on different terms than citizens, just to get a minimum wage. Inactivity doesn’t serve anyone. After all, they could live outside the center, pay taxes, get to know people at work and outside.

For example, Ukrainian citizens have access to the Polish labor market without any additional permits, and the economy has not collapsed because of it. Elmira is a little resentful, because everyone should be allowed to work under the same conditions. Without discrimination.

When I was in Sweden, I immediately got a work

permit, and started working for the Red Cross as an interpreter at Swedish language courses.

Elmira and her children went to Sweden first, because her husband was there.

„I am against social assistance,” she points out. “I had a good life in Kyrgyzstan, at least financially. Here in Poland, I have not yet reached that level. Back home I was earning an equivalent of about 1500-2000 EUR, and that was in 2010. I came to Poland and got 70 PLN, so about 14 EUR! And at the hearing, the Border Guards treated me as if I wanted to use Polish money.”

Elmira left Kyrgyzstan because of political persecution and applied for refugee status. She and her children joined her husband, who was in Sweden. There, she learned about the Dublin III Regulation, according to which the first country of entry can review an application for international protection. And she crossed the European border in Poland, because it was the only place she could enter on a tourist visa.

I didn't even know that there was such a thing as the Dublin Regulation. I showed them all my documents right away, and then it turned out that according to EU regulations, Sweden could send us back to Poland. I agreed to this voluntarily, because to me it wasn't about higher financial support, I just wanted my family to be safe. We applied for family reunification and based on that my husband joined us in Poland.

For me, money didn't matter at that time, because I thought I could work and earn it. And then I clashed with Polish reality and got 70 PLN. I sometimes think about it when I sit in a restaurant and see the

prices. I look at the menu and think, „Oh, this is one paycheck, and that is half a paycheck.” And despite the growing inflation, this amount still hasn’t changed. I’m glad that the period when I couldn’t work is behind me. At that time I felt financially insecure and uncertain about the future, because I was terrified of deportation. I think that was the worst part. When it comes to mentality, Polish is more similar to mine than Swedish. But this uncertainty can lead to depression within a few months. That’s why I understand those people who want to go to the West.

The family did not get refugee status, but a residence permit for humanitarian reasons. It is granted by Poland to people who, on the one hand, are denied refugee status, but on the other hand, it recognizes that deportation to the country of origin would pose a serious threat.

The procedure felt like a ball thrown from one office to another, and from court to court. We got a residence permit and didn’t want to fight any longer.



Integration

My husband is a Muslim, and I am an atheist. Our families are multicultural, and the children have spoken several languages since they were very young. So I think that’s why integration was a little easier for us.

Elmira started learning Polish from the very beginning. There were NGOs coming to the center, and they held various activities that provided an opportunity to learn. There were also Polish courses organized by the Office for Foreigners. However, the residents kept on changing, so learning the

language often started from scratch. When Elmira got her work permit, she started working as a cleaner at a community center, and interacting with Poles helped her learn the language.

Today Elmira works for different NGOs. As part of her work, she helps refugees and migrants find their way in Poland. She works with the Foundation for Freedom and Foundation for Migrants GOOD START as an intercultural assistant at a school, a family assistant at the center for foreigners in Dębak and an integration counselor. She helps migrants with dealing with their affairs - medical, official and other. People who are new to this country or can't speak Polish very well don't know many of the things that she had to learn over the years. She is their interpreter, counselor and advocate.

Residents of the center for foreigners come to her to tell their stories, and she decides what support they need. When people who need legal aid come to her, she refers them to lawyers from the Association for Legal Intervention. When someone is looking for a job, she refers them to a career counselor. She helps people prepare to leave the center. Because the state doesn't do that.

Recently, she has met a mother whose child has a spinal deformity and wears a corset. They were deported to Poland from Germany on the basis of the Dublin III Regulation as well, because the first European country where their fingerprints were collected was Poland. In Germany, the child was under medical care. The corset was too small, so German doctors made a new one, and were going to put it on the child in just two days. Suddenly, the family was deported.

Unfortunately, the insurance company only covered 1,600 PLN, and the total cost was 4,000 PLN. The family did not have enough money. The mother cried because the child has a 41 degree scoliosis. Their spine is close to breaking. A new corset was essential, and she didn't have anywhere to get the money from.

Thanks to the cooperation of three foundations, Elmira managed to get the funds.



School

Sometimes I run workshops in Polish schools, during which I try to show the children what their refugee peers have to face. To begin with, I start speaking to them in Kyrgyz, and they don't understand anything. Later, I ask them how they felt and we start a discussion. The children notice how difficult it is for their refugee peers.

I remember how difficult it was for me in the beginning when I went to parent-teacher meetings. Although I had experience working as an interpreter, I had a headache after 15 minutes of those meetings. First, I had to form a sentence in Kyrgyz or Russian. You hear one sentence and start translating it in your head, and you already hear the next one. Not everyone would be able to do that, I think. It's double the work. And I think it's double the work for these children as well, that's why it's twice as hard for them. Overall, refugee children have it very hard - they are stressed about the situation in their country, about escaping, they feel the stress and uncertainty of their parents who are afraid of being deported, and still have to focus on learning in a foreign language.

That's why I'm proud of my children for doing so well. There was a period when my husband would go to the meetings, because I worked in the afternoons.

One day I came to the meeting and the teacher was shocked, because she thought that only the father was a foreigner and that I was Polish. She was surprised because she thought that our children have been speaking Polish since early childhood.

It doesn't mean that it was easy for them from the beginning. When they arrived in Poland, the children were 12, 10 and 6 years old.

I remember when my youngest came back from school and said, „Mom, Polish children are stupid. They can't speak Kyrgyz, Russian or English. They don't even know a single word in Swedish.” They cried because they felt excluded. The boys managed somehow because the school in Podkowa Leśna has a program to integrate refugee children with a preparatory class. The older children graduated with honors, and the youngest did well, too.

I worked at a school in Podkowa Leśna together with a colleague who speaks English, Dari and Persian, and at that time there were a lot of refugees from Afghanistan. They needed us. We helped, for example, children with disabilities. When I was there, it was easier for them, but I visited school only once or twice a week. On other days the children were on their own. For a Polish child, getting a disability certificate is not a problem, but it is for a refugee.

Then the war in Ukraine started and the school offered permanent contracts to teachers from Ukraine who helped Russian-speaking children. Meanwhile, we continued helping children from our center. We also

worked as mediators between Polish teachers and new teachers from Ukraine who didn't speak Polish. The Ukrainian school curriculum is being partially taught in the preparatory class at Podkowa Leśna school, so Ukrainian children have it a little easier.



Hostility

The center's administration does what it can, and they are open to cooperation with NGOs. But sometimes their hands are tied. They can't accept a donation, because it has to be reported, and someone might issue a negative decision stating that they already have everything. And that's not true.

It used to be a little better. There were more programs to help refugees, including those funded by the government. After 2015, the campaign against refugees began and there is a lot of hostility toward them.

It is different with Ukrainians. Last February, tens of thousands of them crossed the border every day. How are they different from those who are expelled to Belarus, or those who have to stay in detention centers without a work permit? I don't want to complain, but aren't the people from Syria fleeing war as well? People at the center ask me, why can't they get the housing benefits too. They say that „a fish rots from the head.” If it were not for the hostility of the government, a lot more could be done.

3. What have we learnt?

The activities described above are initiatives that were carried out as part of the **Welcome Neighbour! project: Integration of migrants in local communities**. They differ from those originally planned. The **Welcome Neighbour!** activities were designed as an attempt to test our idea for a local integration model. The project was implemented at a time when full-scale war broke out in Ukraine.

The activities were planned before Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2024, when no one had yet considered this kind of attack. After the outbreak of the war, our project **Welcome Neighbour!** resonated even more and – as a literal message to the residents – was needed more than ever. In a crisis situation, immediate decisions were necessary, and above all, a lot of flexibility and openness. The war affected the lives of many people in Poland, and the project itself. Many activities had to be redesigned. The project made it possible to support refugees, as well as the municipalities near Warsaw that hosted them and the schools that welcomed children affected by war into their classrooms.

In addressing unexpected and urgent challenges, we focused on responding to the current needs of the communes. Our attention was also drawn to the residents of the communes, who had to find their way in a new situation. These people wanted to host a large number of newcomers, often in their own homes, without knowing how long the need for help would last. They often acted out of empathy, which exceeded their realistic daily strength. It was not the time for model-like action and building the Model of Local Integration planned in the project. It was a time of crisis and coping with it.

Due to the scale of the war and the chaos it caused, many people who hadn't previously been involved in intercultural activities were now involved in providing aid and dealing with the new situation. Some were learning on the job. They were discovering for themselves what others had already described in professional publications about integration and supporting a multicultural local community.

Some of the practices and good experiences that we have collected in this publication may seem obvious to integration experts and researchers, but many of them are valuable for practitioners, offering not only a recommendation but also some context and justification, explaining why a particular solution works. We value the feedback and expertise of our partner communes, and are proud to share it with you. It is the direct result of the personal experience and commitment of the participants. Every suggestion is a lesson from someone's everyday life and a practice that really works. If the suggestions of the practitioners do not match our experience, we will let you know.

The Polish Migration Forum has been working on the integration of migrants for over seventeen years. We feel that we already know a lot about this topic. The **Welcome Neighbour!** project was an opportunity to take a look at our own knowledge and broaden our horizons. These are our conclusions:



It is worth recognising migrants as a permanent part of the local community, which means taking their needs into account when planning social services. It is important to recognise migrants as a group of residents with specific needs and to see supporting them as one of our tasks. Meeting the needs of migrants is just as important for ensuring an equal and cohesive society as taking care of the needs of people with disabilities, senior citizens, working people and children.

Well-planned and implemented measures aimed at helping migrants find their way in a new place benefit everyone, as they



strengthen the whole community and prevent future social tensions resulting from mutual resentment. A stable housing and financial situation is crucial for every person, which is why a smart housing policy and support for employment and education play a major role in successful integration. Without providing for basic living needs, it is difficult to talk about effective integration.



Integration is promoted by interaction. It is helpful to create opportunities and design spaces that generate an impulse for interaction. Research shows that social bonds are formed in accessible and safe places where people can take a walk and spend time together, where residents can see and hear each other, and have short, casual conversations. Wherever there is life, emotions and relationships are created, and these generate empathy, interest in one another and solidarity. Therefore, investing in infrastructure such as pavements, parks, benches and meeting places can have a positive impact on integration, including intercultural integration.




It is important to pay local government, school or community centre employees a decent wage to avoid frequent job rotation. Employees should be provided with stability and predictability, as this allows them to engage in their work. Ensuring adequate funding also ensures that staff are highly qualified and that the right number of people are employed in local government, schools and community centres, thus avoiding excessive workloads, discouragement and the inability to devote sufficient time to issues such as intercultural integration. The well-being of employees creates space for development in the area of interculturality. People who don't have to worry about their own livelihood are more open, willing to cooperate and take on new activities.




Intercultural education and preparation for working with people with a migration background should be a permanent

and important element of preparation for working in local governments, schools, social welfare centres, community centres, or other places providing public services.



It is important that the local authorities recognise the role of non-governmental organisations, which often perform important tasks. The commune should recognise and strengthen such organisations: build their capacity, develop their professionalism, treat them as partners, listen to their voices, invite them to discussions and decision-making processes, and provide funding. Sometimes organisations are treated as unprofessional enthusiasts, and their work as a hobby rather than activities for which they should be paid a proper wage.




It is a good idea to enable residents to meet each other through various activities. This builds a support network. We noticed that the Polish language courses we organised for migrants were



not only an opportunity for them to learn the language, but also an important social event and support group, a forum for job searching or solving everyday problems. Migrants should also be given the opportunity and be encouraged to learn about the culture and rules of the community in which they currently live. An integration course could be combined with learning the language of the host country. Knowledge of the values and rules of the host community helps to avoid conflicts.



It is important to plan team-building events such as festivals, picnics, film screenings, sports or arts activities in such a way that they are also accessible to people who do not speak Polish fluently or come from other cultural backgrounds. In most cases, minor adjustments are enough. These are possible when the employees who organise such events are aware of the needs and specific characteristics of their audience. Efforts should be made to reach migrants when promoting integration events – through the religious groups that bring them together, through social media groups, and also through cooperation with local leaders.



Integration is a task for everyone. It requires cooperation between public institutions such as communes, schools, community centres and activity centres, as well as residents, local leaders, civil society organisations, including local foundations and associations.

4. Best practices , what schools, cultural centres, offices, non-governmental organisations, and local activists recommend

This chapter is a collection of experiences gathered during the cooperation with the communes of Marki, Izabelin and Podkowa Leśna within the framework of the project Welcome Neighbor! These are the voices of people working in offices, schools, community centers, NGOs, as well as those working to support migrants and migrant women individually. These experiences overlap in many areas with the set of good practices that we have been developing in the team of the Polish Migration Forum Foundation for more than seventeen years. This part of the publication is intended to give voice to the communes themselves and show activities focusing on creating a multicultural society from their perspective.

The experiences collected here do not cover all the areas that make up the comprehensive variety of activities aimed at integrating a community. However, you can find complementary materials prepared within the framework of other projects of the Polish Migration Foundation and other organizations that specialize in the topic of migration. The areas we have focused on in this publication mainly concern **education, access to public services and cultural offer, and anti-discrimination.**

4.1. Understanding the concept of „integration” based on the cooperation with the communes of Marki, Izabelin and Podkowa Leśna

The terms „integration” and „counteracting exclusion” are frequently used yet interpreted differently. Therefore, we asked people involved in activities for migrants in Marki, Izabelin and Podkowa Leśna to think together about how they understand them and what counteracting exclusion means in practice and integration. We also talked about which activity areas should be most important if we want to ensure integration and counter exclusion.

We also discussed the factors which favor these processes and the ones that hinder them.

We met with those responsible for the project Welcome Neighbor! Integration of migrants in local communities, to summarize the conclusions of the activities and to exchange observations and experiences. Some of the practices worked well, others require changes. We tried to sort out key concepts and areas which need support - they can be a guide for other organizations. The topics we covered include education, inclusion of migrants in local activities, such as co-creating the cultural offer, social assistance and anti-discrimination.

4.1.1. Which activities promote and which do not promote the integration of a multicultural community

Education

a. Introducing children with a migration background to a new school

Learning in a new school should start with a conversation about the child's current situation and needs, but also interests and previous school experiences. The idea is to learn more, but also to give the child a chance to say something about themselves and introduce themselves.

At the Bohaterów Warszawy Elementary School in Podkowa Leśna, the first meeting with a new child and their parents is conducted by the headmistress, Ms. Agnieszka Hein. During the meeting, together they fill out not only formal documents, but also an information document, which includes questions about the child's talents and interests. The documents are translated into English and Russian. The information from the interview, contained in the information sheet, is later also available to tutors.

With new pupils in mind, at a time when there were a lot of them, the school

in Podkowa Leśna also prepared room signs (e.g. canteen, changing rooms, etc.) in Ukrainian, which helped the students to find their way around.

Newly arrived children usually join general classes. Despite the possibility of creating preparatory classes, according to Polish law, most of the people working in the schools we spoke to believe that this is not a solution that promotes quick learning of the Polish language and integration of children. In the experience of Ms. Anita Fieducik, the headmistress of the Izabelin Elementary School, it appears that new students should be given some time to get accustomed to the new situation in the first days of school, and we should not give them too much attention. That way they can quietly join the class and observe what is going on.

Including the child in the classroom community and facilitating relationships with other children is the task of the tutors. Sometimes teachers try to get other children to help them - especially if the class already includes people from the same country who speak the same language. Such practices can bring some benefits, but require caution and sensitivity. Children should be able to make the decision whether they are willing to act as „guides.”

Maria Konarzewska, an intercultural assistant from Elementary School No. 4

in Marki, believes that no child should be responsible for introducing another to school - it's too much of an emotional burden. Assigning such roles may be beyond young people's capabilities. It is better to encourage the whole class to support the joining classmates, but rather not to assign specific individuals to the role of a guide. Even if, on the surface, it may seem like it will be an interesting challenge for them and a big favour for the new child in class. The same goes for asking children who know two languages to help new pupils with translation - this is very difficult and stressful for the child, who has to focus on the lessons themselves and have time to do their homework.

Things to consider when introducing children to school:



Talk to the child and their parents during the school enrolment process to allow the teaching staff to learn about the child's life situation, interests and educational history.



Give the child time to get used to the new school without putting them in the spotlight during the first days of school.



Don't burden other children with the responsibility of introducing a new friend to school, don't assign other children the role of interpreters.



Offer activities that are aimed at all children at the school, making sure that those who cannot speak Polish can actively participate in them

Integrating new children at school is easiest when you manage to involve larger groups in joint activities - projects, tasks, various challenges, without a special focus on children with a migration background. It's good to propose activities that are interesting for each child, while making sure that their form allows those who do not yet speak Polish well to participate. All this makes them start playing together in an unforced way, and thanks to this they get to know each other better. In Maria Konarzewska's experience, artwork or joint volunteer projects work well.

b. How to work with the parents of migrant students?

Cooperation between parents and schools is an important factor which influences the integration of children. Parents usually prepare their children for their first day of school and help them to find their way in a new environment. Therefore, it is important that parents get to know the Polish school and understand it.

At the school in Podkowa Leśna, children who are joining the school meet with the headmaster and their parents. They talk about the child's situation and interests, but also discuss how the school works; the child also receives their lesson plan, which is explained in detail.

At the school in Izabelin, information meetings were held once a week (at the moment there is no longer any need to organise them), during which the headmaster, together with the intercultural assistant who worked at the school, explained how the school operates and what rules apply (e.g. related to the use of mobile phones, teacher duties, etc.).

It was important that the cultural assistant was always available to parents who had different questions and concerns. Experience at the primary school in Izabelin shows that these didn't always concern subjects directly related to school, sometimes they were related to the organisation of everyday life (e.g. the availability of healthcare).



Headmistress Anita Fieducik believes that the school could be a place that distributes materials to parents that have been prepared, for example, by communes or social organisations, despite not conducting extensive information activities on its own. The school can also monitor whether parents are using the electronic journals (e.g. Librus, Vulcan) and if they are not, make sure they understand how to use this tool.

Sometimes it is difficult for the school to contact the parents of migrant pupils (this may be due to a language barrier or a lack of familiarity with Librus). In such situations, it would be helpful if they could ask an intercultural assistant for help in contacting the parents (and, if necessary, for help in translating the conversation). It is worth considering cultural differences and customs, e.g. the means of communication – some parents from Ukraine are less willing to use email, and for them, instant messengers (e.g. Telegram, Viber) are a better way to communicate. Not answering emails does not necessarily mean that they are disregarding or neglecting communication with the school, but it may be due to the fact that they are not used to checking their emails.

Maria Konarzewska draws attention to the need to involve parents in school life – parents should feel important, invited. It is worth showing them how they can get involved in school life.

Martyna Łukaszewska, a teacher and intercultural trainer from the Foundation for Freedom, emphasises that in order for this to succeed, it is necessary to ensure the integration of Polish and migrant parents. She adds that there are sometimes misunderstandings between parents (e.g. when parents fear that the attention given to migrant children is at the expense of Polish children). Educators have a key role in clarifying such misunderstandings. However, it is worth remembering that this is also a new situation for them. Therefore, it is worth participating in training sessions, workshops and using materials that support working in a multicultural environment at school. It is also worth noting that the time invested in supporting new students is beneficial to the development of the whole class and the well-being of each of the pupils – it can prevent future tensions.

Practical information for migrant parents can be found, for example, in a publication issued by the Polish Migration Forum entitled [Education at a Polish School – Everything You Need to Know About School Education in Poland.](#)

In order to involve parents of children with a migration background in school life, they should be provided with:



an opportunity to get to know the Polish school and discuss the rules and customs that apply there



the opportunity to contact an intercultural assistant – a person who will answer questions if necessary, but will also actively inform about important issues related to school life. It is worth remembering that for many parents, the language barrier is an important obstacle, so it is good if they can talk in their own language



an opportunity to participate in the life of the school community – e.g. an invitation to participate in class activities or to get involved in organising school events. These activities are an opportunity to build social relationships between parents



the possibility of integrating with other parents (for example, at meetings or other events at the school).

On the YouTube channel of the Polish Migration Forum, you can find a video guide [How to use Librus?](#) in different languages: Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, English, Vietnamese and Belarusian.

c. How can the learning of Polish as a foreign language be effectively supported at school?

Learning Polish is one of the key challenges in the first period after starting

education at a Polish school.

One of the options available to schools is to create preparatory classes where children can focus on learning Polish. However, the experience of those who took part in the interviews shows that this solution is not usually helpful for the quick integration of children with a migration background into a new school. Children who learn in preparatory classes in a group of people from other countries who mostly speak the same language do not establish relationships with Polish peers from the beginning of their education. They talk to each other in their own language, so in practice they have far fewer opportunities to use Polish than when they join the general classes.

Agnieszka Hein, headmistress of the primary school in Podkowa Leśna, says that her experience shows that preparatory classes are a good solution when children from different cultural backgrounds join the school, as it takes more time to introduce them to living in a new environment. In the case of the school in Podkowa Leśna, it was a group of children who came from Afghanistan.

The second option is to learn Polish outside the core programme, for example, six hours of Polish lessons per week based on the regulation of the Ministry of National Education. This regulation was introduced on March 21, 2022, on the organisation of education, upbringing and care of children and youth who are citizens of Ukraine and arrived in Poland after February 24, 2022.

It is worth offering additional Polish language lessons to all children who need them. In addition, teachers of Polish as a foreign language should cooperate with teachers of other school subjects, e.g. to be able to suggest how to phrase instructions or questions, or to prepare teaching materials in a way that allows children with a lower level of Polish to learn at the same level as children with a higher level of Polish. It is important to remember that teaching Polish as a foreign language is a different task than teaching Polish as a native language. It requires a different kind of methodological preparation from teachers.

Maria Konarzewska points out several organisational issues that are very important for the effectiveness of these lessons:



classes are often organised for groups of children from different grades. However, while putting older children into groups is not very problematic, organising joint classes for grades 1-3 is difficult. First graders are still getting used to school, learning the alphabet, writing and reading. Working with them is completely different from working with children in grades 2-3, who have already learned these basic skills



Polish as a foreign language classes often take place in the afternoons, they are extracurricular activities, for which children often come already tired. It is therefore important to ensure a pleasant atmosphere and to make the classes as attractive as possible, using various learning tools (games, quizzes). Maria thinks that there are still not many teaching materials available (e.g. lesson plans, exercises and materials to use) for teaching Polish as a foreign language. It is difficult to find interesting inspirations that can be used for work. Courses and training sessions offered by non-governmental organisations, among others, are a great help in better preparing for running interesting and engaging classes.



a person who teaches Polish can be much more effective if they speak the children's native language, especially when teaching children who don't speak Polish at all. If possible, it is worth looking for teachers who are able to communicate with the children in their native language if necessary (however, opinions on this matter are divided)¹.

¹ There are different opinions: some people believe that it is better if children can't speak their language, that they learn a foreign language better through immersion, i.e. total immersion and using the foreign language.

Headmistress Anita Fieducik points out that six lessons a week is a lot for children, who are already tired after a full day of school and don't want to participate in any extra activities. In her opinion, a better solution would be, for example, three hours of Polish per week (in smaller groups), while at the same time exempting pupils from the obligation to attend lessons that they don't understand well at the beginning of their education.

At the school in Podkowa Leśna, in addition to Polish language classes, additional classes have been launched for migrant students - English (1 hour per week) and mathematics (3 hours per week). The children are referred to these classes by different subject teachers. The classes are not compulsory, but some pupils attend them to catch up on material they are struggling with due to the language barrier. Most of the pupils who attend these classes are older (from grade 6), as they want to prepare better for their final exams.

Maria Konarzewska also points out that the level of understanding of the Polish language among children should be regularly assessed, as well as general knowledge of a given subject in the child's native language. A practice that works well, especially with younger children, is 'repetition game': children listen to a text read to them in Polish and then they tell the story in their own words (if the Polish teacher knows the children's language, they can tell it in their native language). This allows you to check how much the children actually understand. Teachers may not notice this, especially if the young person is quiet and doesn't ask questions. This kind of real-time information can help teachers adapt their teaching, e.g. by simplifying instructions, using simple language, or changing the time limit for exams.

In addition to learning Polish, the students take part in regular classes, which can be a difficult challenge for them, depending on the level of teaching and the complexity of the content. The school in Podkowa Leśna has used technology to support its students. One of the parents wrote a special mini-programme that modified Google Translate for grades 4-6 and 7-8. An on-screen display in the classroom showed a real-time

translation of what the teacher was saying into Ukrainian. The solution was used in classes that were particularly difficult – biology, geography, history.

What to pay special attention to in terms of supporting the learning of Polish:



children learn Polish faster if they participate in classes in Polish and engage in relations with their peers than when they study in classes only for migrant children²



Polish as a foreign language lessons should be as interesting and engaging as possible – it is worth looking for interesting, non-standard forms of teaching



the youngest children should have classes designed for their age group, because working with them requires a different approach than working with children who can already read and write



it is worth regularly assessing the level of understanding of the Polish language and passing on this information to the teachers of specific subjects



using technological possibilities allows for the introduction of effective facilitations (e.g. live translation).

The Polish Migration Forum Foundation recommends the publication **Diary-dictionary** – a tool to support the learning of Polish by children with a migration background.

² Są różne opinie na temat oddziałów przygotowawczych – zespół asystentek kulturowych PFM zwraca uwagę na to, że dobrze prowadzony oddział przygotowawczy pełni bardzo ważną rolę w rozwoju społecznym dziecka w pierwszym okresie po przyjeździe do nowego kraju – zapewnia poczucie bezpieczeństwa i pomaga w lepszej integracji ze społecznością szkolną na późniejszym etapie.

d. Intercultural assistance at school, a support programme for children, school staff and parents of children with a migration background

An intercultural assistant at school is a person who can support both children and adults – teachers, parents. It is also important to remember that this person works not only for people with a migration background, but for the entire school community. Their activities should also be directed at Polish children in order to support the relationship building process and mutual understanding between the two groups.

The effectiveness of intercultural assistants requires good working conditions, including:



providing a suitable space (office, room) where the assistant can be approached by children and adults who want to use their services – to talk, ask questions, share their concerns or ask for support.

The school in Izabelin provided such an office. According to the headmistress, Anita Fieducik, it was clear that many children were eager to visit the office during breaks or after lessons to talk to the intercultural assistant. The children knew that they could always see her if they had any questions or needed someone to talk to; they felt comfortable in that space.



Cooperation with teachers – reporting situations in which children may need support at their new school or when teachers need help in communicating with the child or their parents.
Cooperation of all teaching staff with the intercultural assistant.



The assistant monitors how children with a migration background are doing at school, regardless of whether they ask for support themselves. This allows for early intervention in situations where a child may be experiencing difficulties but is not willing to ask for help. At the school in Izabelin, when a large number of children

from Ukraine joined the school, the intercultural assistant and the headmistress would review the diaries every week to react in time when someone missed a lot of classes or had learning difficulties.



Availability at fixed hours known to everyone. According to Maria Konarzewska, an intercultural assistant, they should be on duty for 20-30 hours per month.



Ensuring that an assistant is always present at the school. Children and adults get used to the presence of the assistant and the possibility of benefitting from their support. Unfortunately, this is not always the case due to financial and organisational reasons.



Ensuring that assistants have access to supervision.

The tasks of intercultural assistants vary depending on the agreement with the school management. Based on the experiences of the primary schools in Izabelin, Podkowa Leśna and Marki, intercultural assistants were mainly responsible for:



direct support for children with a migration background – during office hours, which children could come to with questions, or to ask for help in communicating with the class or teachers (e.g. when they didn't understand instructions or tasks)



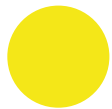
organising activities that allow children to get to know each other and integrate at school



building social skills of all students attending the school (including anti-violence and anti-discrimination education, intercultural communication).

Maria Konarzewska's experience shows that it is important for these activities to be aimed at all children at school, not only those with a migration background. Activities that involve all children allow them to get

to know each other and integrate faster. The topics of the activities don't have to be exclusively related to intercultural issues - Maria has involved children in projects on topics such as empathy, conversations about tolerance and kindness, charity fairs and volunteer projects.



communicating with parents of children with a migration background – informing them about how the school works, passing on important news (e.g. about school holidays or school events) supporting teachers in communicating with parents.

In the case of the Izabelin school, it was setting up a group on a messaging app to which parents were invited. The intercultural assistant would then send all important information about school life there.

Currently, the largest group of children with a migration background in Polish schools are from Ukraine, and intercultural assistants have worked with them in Ukrainian and Russian. However, children from other countries also attend these schools. Intercultural assistants should support all children, including those who don't speak the languages mentioned above. In these cases, they should be able to collaborate with other experts who can help them work with these children (e.g. people employed at local integration centres or in NGOs that support integration).

Martyna Łukaszewska from the Foundation for Freedom points out that local governments should create integration centres that support the inclusion of migrants in activities alongside the residents of a given town. Such units should operate locally, at the commune level. People dealing with intercultural assistance in schools in a particular commune could cooperate with them –both to inform about the functioning of such places and the scope of their services, as well as to cooperate with them to better support children studying at schools, if necessary.

The Polish Migration Forum offers a training course for intercultural assistants called the '[School of Diversity](#)'. It is the first full training course in Poland that can be fully completed online. A certificate is awarded after

completing the course.

e. Preparing the teaching staff to work with children with a migration background (in terms of both intercultural communication skills and specialised skills, e.g. teaching Polish as a foreign language, grading migrant students).

Effective learning should not only allow for the understanding of the lesson at the language level, but also the understanding of cultural contexts, which is very important in the case of some subjects, such as Polish language or history.

Children who have started school in another country should have the opportunity to learn about and understand the customs and rules of the Polish school. It is worth paying special attention to the challenges of secondary school education for young people, where there is no regionalisation and admissions are based on exam results. Some students who started their education in the higher grades of primary school and studied in Polish for a short time have no chance of passing exams with good grades – not because they lack knowledge of the subject, but because they don't understand the instructions. Exams or tests that check knowledge should be designed and prepared in a way that makes them comprehensible to people with different levels of language proficiency. Then, students who are not fluent in Polish have the chance to pass an exam based on their knowledge of a given subject, not on their proficiency in Polish. In addition, teachers should be trained in assessing and testing the subject knowledge of pupils from outside Poland – it is impossible to apply the same criteria to migrant children as to Polish children.

At some schools, a migrant child is provided with comprehensive pedagogical and psychological support (as are children with special educational needs) until they have settled into their new environment. This means that the school tries to choose forms of support for a given

child, depending on their needs, while at the same time ensuring that they function well in a peer group, cope with learning the school material and participate in lessons conducted in a language that is foreign to them. Children with a migration background should always be treated by the school as children with special educational needs (which is required by law, among other things).

If children are not given comprehensive support, their problems may not be recognised quickly enough, and they will not be able to fully benefit from their education. Adapting teaching means changing the way you work with a student taking into account their individual abilities. These can be implemented in various areas (in terms of content, methods, form).



For children who are not familiar with the language, it seems particularly important to adapt the content by simplifying it so that it is linguistically comprehensible. Other methods that are often used are e.g. giving more time to complete assignments or writing them in simple and clear language.

Zuzanna Rejmer, a psychologist and trainer working at the Polish Migration Forum Foundation, emphasises the importance of long-term planning of integration strategies when working with multicultural classes. The initiative to create a comprehensive strategy, supported by a prior analysis of the needs of a given school, should come from decision-makers, such as the school management. Then the action plan is implemented step by step throughout the school year. It comes from the internal needs of the school community and is not imposed by external parties. It would be good if schools had a budget for integration and intercultural activities and could manage it themselves, implementing it in cooperation with a selected contractor or NGO. They should feel like they are in charge of these activities.

In every school, the situation of students with a migration background is different. It is the teachers, and most often intercultural assistants, who know best in which area the school needs the most support: whether in teaching children who don't speak Polish, psychological support for children who have experienced trauma, or, for example, training for teachers working with multicultural classes.

Developing a strategy for intercultural integration is a complex topic that should not only be part of school activities, but also an intercultural integration plan for the entire commune or local community. The strategy should include cooperation between various institutions, both public and non-public. This will ensure that integration activities complement each other and that each organisation or institution focuses on its area of expertise.

f. Training for teachers

Developing intercultural competences can take place at different levels. Teachers should constantly expand their competences and professional knowledge, especially in order to:



effectively and successfully teach children who don't know Polish very well



prevent conflicts and misunderstandings between children from different cultural and ethnic groups



recognise and then refer children who may need support after difficult, sometimes even traumatic experiences in their country of origin

It is important that training for teaching staff takes place during working hours. Teachers are often overworked and don't have time for other activities. Zuzanna Rejmer emphasises that inviting teachers to workshops outside of school can be very inspiring. They have the opportunity to meet people from other institutions, exchange experiences and see that others face similar challenges.

Ideally, the training should be divided into a few stages. First, the teachers gain knowledge. In the next step, they return to work and have the task of using their new skills with their students. The trainees then meet with the trainer again, and can thus deepen and strengthen the acquired knowledge that they have put into practice.

Teachers can use the many materials and workshops available, for example, from non-governmental organisations.

Integration activity scenarios developed as part of the **Welcome Neighbour!** project can be downloaded [HERE](#)).

The Polish Migration Forum Foundation provides support for trainers, for example as part of the **RESET – Relationships, Strength, Emotions** and Care programme. These are psycho-educational activities that strengthen mental resilience. The activities are aimed at classes with children who have experienced forced migration. Find out more about the activities [HERE](#). Another integration activity for schools that can be used in cooperation with the Polish Migration Forum is [Cały świat w naszej klasie](#) (The whole world in our classroom). The activities are aimed at children in kindergartens and pupils in grades 1-8.

Integration of migrants into local community – access to public services and cultural activities

With the arrival of a huge number of people from Ukraine (around one million people have remained in Poland), a big change has been noticeable: our society has become more diverse. The diversity is visible on a daily basis, and people from other countries are present in all areas of social life. They use public and private services, provide these services themselves, join teams at workplaces and classrooms at schools.

Inclusion and successful integration require effort and well-planned and thoughtful actions. The success of this process translates – and will increasingly do so in the future – into the quality of life of local communities. Local authorities that engage in systemic activities, include initiatives aimed at inclusion and integration in their strategies, and create good conditions for migrants to settle and develop their activities can gain a lot from the arrival of new residents. The quality of life of all residents will improve in a well-managed, diverse community. There will be less conflicts and concerns, and a greater sense of community and belonging.

It is not only necessary to effectively implement local policies, but also to respond to the concerns and challenges of the community. They also need to get used to the new situation, which has happened in a relatively short period of time. Communication with the local community, talking about the benefits of the presence of migrants, initiating opportunities to get



together, eliminating difficulties and barriers in communication are actions that should be taken by local governments if they want to consciously adapt to the change we are currently experiencing.

Openness and willingness to communicate can significantly improve the process of using public services for people who are not familiar with the Polish system (e.g. registering with specialists, principles of granting benefits, etc.). This openness is facilitated by preparing to work with foreigners and appropriate training, e.g. on cultural differences and raising awareness of these differences. Accessibility is also built by hiring culturally diverse people for customer service positions, giving customers the

chance to see these differences, e.g. skin colour, employee's clothing.

Migrants who live in Poland should also be able to benefit from the cultural institutions' offer, which would be available to them in terms of language and cost (taking into account people who are in a difficult financial situation). The institutions should also make an effort to reach out to the local migrant community, i.e. create advertising messages with this community in mind and use advertising channels that reach them, encourage them to host or co-host events, provide translation or the opportunity to benefit from their offer even to people who don't speak Polish.


Creating conditions in which people with a migration background – both voluntary and forced – can live, work, learn and develop their potential without experiencing exclusion requires actions and initiatives both at the systemic level (which is beyond the reach of local government and institutions) as well as local – taking into account the local characteristics and diversity of the migrant community and its needs.

Integration means that both sides of the equation contribute to the relationship and shape the local community together. These processes have become increasingly visible since the number of migrants has significantly increased since the full-scale war in Ukraine began in 2022. However, it is important to create the conditions for social integration in a conscious way, in order to successfully move from helping (in 2022, not many people were involved in this) to co-creating a local community based on the equal contribution of all people living in a given place.


What promotes intercultural integration at the local level?

One can speak of integration when migrants start to actively participate in local activities and take on various roles, e.g. in the school council, class council, or housing association. They can also get involved in social activities and participate in various initiatives related to their interests or skills.


Here are some examples of how local integration was successfully strengthened in our three communes:




Supporting migrants in learning the Polish language – both adults (e.g. in cultural centres, in cooperation with non-governmental organisations) and children (in schools and in the form of informal education).



Support for people working in public institutions in communicating with migrants who don't speak Polish, e.g. by providing translation and intercultural mediation where necessary and preparing and providing informational materials in different languages.



Educational and informational activities aimed at migrants, explaining how public services in Poland work and how to get things done in different institutions.



Involving the Polish community and people with a migration background in joint activities based on mutual and equal contributions (cultural exchange, participation in the planning and organisation of events, and creating space for migrants to host them).

Symmetry of activities and exchange between newcomers and existing residents are particularly important in this area. When inviting migrants to participate in the organisation of events, it is worth taking into account their customs and traditions.

It may be a good idea to invite them to specific activities, e.g. to prepare additional culture-related stands or to lead tradition-related activities. Migrants should not only be invited to represent their culture of origin – their participation and involvement in local initiatives can include the same tasks as those carried out by people who organise events.

Migrants will not always be willing to talk about their culture or experiences –

they may want to bring in their diverse interests, skills and talents.

It is also important to make sure that invitations to events are written in the language that the migrants speak. The idea is that these people not only learn about the cultural offer in a given town, but also realise that they are just as welcome as the Polish residents.

Cooperation and mutual visibility of different institutions.

People with a migration background use various services and are on the radar of many institutions and social actors. Cooperation, exchanging information about the needs of the migrant community, sharing experiences and resources are the conditions for an effective implementation of policies and inclusive measures.

Many local authorities have experienced effective cooperation between public and social actors in the context of aid activities, especially in 2022, when it proved possible to organise official and unofficial working groups. We should make the most of the contacts and skills developed in this manner and build on this potential to further cooperate with the aim of creating an inclusive and supportive environment for the local migrant community.

Given the current situation in Poland, there is a growing need to develop the competences of local governments in implementing effective inclusion measures. Tools such as networking and the exchange of knowledge and experience will enable them to quickly acquire the necessary skills and learn from each other.

The transition from helping to collaborating.

After several months of intensive efforts to help people who often arrived in Poland with 'just one suitcase' and needed emergency assistance, it was time for systemic, long-term and inclusive measures. Perceiving the migrant community as a group of people in need of constant support is neither

beneficial nor constructive. Those who have stayed in Poland want to live a normal life – work, study and participate in social life as much as possible. A shift in activities from aid to inclusion will support their integration. It will also show the Polish society that people who have settled in the country don't only require help, but can also make a valuable contribution to the functioning of the local community, if given the opportunity.

Recognising and appreciating diversity.

In 2022, a huge number of people from Ukraine came to Poland, which makes it easy to forget that they are not the only group of people with a migration background living in Poland. There are also people from Belarus, Russia, Georgia, Moldova, Vietnam, India and other countries (including refugees). At the same time, the people who came from Ukraine are not a homogenous group either, and conflicts and tensions often arise between the newly arrived people from different parts of the country – for example, between people from Ukraine who speak Russian on a daily basis and those who speak Ukrainian.

Misunderstandings also occur between people who lived in Poland before 2022 and those who came based on the legal regulations introduced in March 2022. The group that lived in Poland before the outbreak of the full-scale war often indicates that they didn't have the same support as those who arrived later, and consider this unfair.

It is important to recognise this diversity and the resulting consequences and challenges in order to avoid unintentionally causing the conflicts mentioned above. It also enables a better understanding of the different needs and situations of people who have come to Poland and to better adjust the activities aimed at them.

For diversity management, it can be particularly valuable to include people with a migration background to help understand these differences, while making sure that, wherever possible, people representing different migrant groups are included, or at least ensuring that multiple perspectives are

taken into account when planning activities.

Engaging the migrant community in local activities – how to include people effectively?

In all participating municipalities (Podkowa Leśna, Izabelin and Marki) people organise events to which migrants are also invited. The experiences of the municipalities mentioned above show that encouraging their participation, as well as involving them in the organisation of events, requires thoughtful communication.

According to Maria Konarzewska from Marki, the key to success is a clear message (also in other languages - e.g. Ukrainian, Russian) that migrants are also welcome. While doing so, it shouldn't be emphasised that these are events targeted specifically at them. According to her, these people don't want to be put in the spotlight – they want to participate in the events like all other local residents, not as a group that needs special treatment.

When planning joint activities, it is worth paying attention to choosing a form that will enable people to get involved even if they don't speak Polish very well - these could be manual (art) activities, gamification, sports activities, artistic activities, preparing food. Elmira Abasbekova has similar experiences from Podkowa Leśna – any opportunity to meet and do something that is tangible together is good. It is also beneficial to engage people in regular activities, which promotes building lasting relationships.

Inviting the local community, including migrants, to co-create events, for example when they are initiated by other actors, for example by NGOs, is a good practice. Co-creating events can involve preparing and leading activities by people with a migration background, especially those that will be interesting for the Polish community and allow for discussion or activities, e.g. cooking together or art activities that may refer to customs from their countries of origin.

At the same time, it is worth making sure that people with a migration

background decide for themselves how they want to get involved in such events. It may turn out that not everyone wants to focus on introducing the culture of their countries of origin and may feel more comfortable with other tasks, such as organisational or technical ones related to event logistics.

It is worth creating a space for migrants to create and invite the local community to their events on their own. This gives them a sense of agency. It allows them to be creative, discover and develop new resources, and try out new roles, often different from those associated with their daily work. When organising an event, migrants can take on the role of an organiser or leader, which can be empowering and is a distraction from their current job, which is often different and below their qualifications compared to the one they had in their country of origin.

The experience of our communes also shows that the Polish community is interested in learning about the culture and history of other countries. We are happy to try new dishes, but also learn about the places where migrants come from. An example of this is Aleksander Strojny's lecture entitled **Not only geopolitics and war – a lecture about Ukraine**, organised at the Izabelin Cultural Centre in 2022. Around eighty people came to this event, most of them Poles, who were eager to engage in discussions after the lecture on geopolitical topics as well as those related to culture, cuisine and everyday life in Ukraine.

Migrants themselves are a great support in reaching the migrant community. They cooperate with various institutions – cultural centres, communes, non-governmental organisations and schools – and at the same time have relationships in the migrant community in a given location. These people often act as a link between the institution and the target group. Krystyna Bocheńska and Daria Kuźniecowa-Dudko from the Izabelin Cultural Centre, where Juliana Voitiv worked for over a year and a half as a link between the institutions in Izabelin and the migrant community from Ukraine, emphasise the great importance of this kind of cooperation. She was at the Izabelin Cultural Centre every day, for four hours a day. She was a source of information and advice for people from Ukraine about how to

organise their life in Poland and about the services offered by the Izabelin Cultural Centre for migrants living in the commune.

The Centre for Culture and Civic Initiatives in Podkowa Leśna has a similar experience, where communication efforts related to inviting the migrant community were supported by a volunteer who came to Podkowa in 2022. Until her departure from Poland, she led a Ukrainian-speaking group on a messaging app, where she encouraged people to use the centre's services and thus attracted a migrant community. After she left, there was no one who could communicate in Ukrainian or Russian; it is clear that these people are not currently using the centre's services.



Effectively involving migrants in enjoying and co-creating local events requires:



an offer that is aimed at all people living in a given location, taking into account elements of intercultural education or allowing migrants to actively contribute in its creation



organising events that promote mutual cultural exchange and getting to know each other's cultures, histories and customs



involving (including employing) people with a migration background in the activities of institutions and organisations, which helps to better reach the migrant community

Many factors influence how successfully a person can settle in a new country, especially in the case of unplanned migration. Some of these factors, if not addressed, can significantly hinder the integration of migrants into the local community. Taking action to eliminate these factors can support more effective integration and improve the quality of life of these people.

Factors that can hinder integration:

Taking care of young children on your own and the potential difficulty of balancing work and caring responsibilities

After the war in Ukraine broke out in 2022, many women with children came to Poland, while their partners were often unable to leave Ukraine. Some of these women had no family in Poland who could help look after young children. In the absence of a social support network (family, friends) on site, combining work and caring responsibilities can be particularly difficult, even if the children are already attending school or kindergarten.

Difficult experiences of forced migration, including trauma (due to being in a war zone or a dangerous escape route; this applies not only to people from Ukraine, but also to refugees from other parts of the world).

For people who are struggling with trauma, the effort of organising their life in a new place and integrating into the local community may not be possible until their mental health improves.

Living in limbo due to difficulties in finding their way in a new country while having no prospect of a safe return home.

This causes some people to adopt a wait-and-see strategy: they don't start organising their life in Poland, while not knowing when they will be able to return home. Many people refuse to work and live off benefits. Sometimes, these people choose not to send their children to Polish schools (because they don't plan a future in Poland), which is detrimental to children and young people in the long run.

Difficult or unstable family situation (e.g. addictions, violence, health problems or disabilities).

Note that when these kinds of difficulties are combined with forced migration, the people experiencing them are highly at risk of exclusion. Social assistance measures should be targeted with greater care at families in similar situations, taking into account the possibility of providing language support and assistance (interpretation and intercultural mediation).

Difficult experiences related to using public services or taking up a job.

In situations where people have experienced discrimination, major difficulties in accessing services (which may be due to various factors, not necessarily intentional hindrance of access) or have had bad experiences with, for example, unfair working conditions, integration is more difficult, and dealing with everyday matters or taking up employment is associated with additional stress.

The Polish Migration Forum Foundation provides free psychological assistance for adults and children.

To make an appointment with a psychologist, call:
+48 692 913 993 or email: **zapisy@forummigracyjne.org**

The people who provide information about registration for events and specialist consultations speak the following languages: **Polish, English, Ukrainian, Russian, Belarusian and Georgian.**

Support in difficult life situations – social work with migrants

Among migrants, as in the rest of our society, there are individuals and families who need support in difficult life situations such as illness, disability, addiction, violence and caring for dependent persons.

Effective social work requires communication with the supported individuals and building trust and relationships on which long-term work can be based. Based on this need, the Social Welfare Centre in Marki hired Olena Rafalik, a psychologist from Ukraine with experience in social work in March 2021. Olena works at the Social Welfare Centre every Tuesday. She works with the centre's team, supporting other employees when necessary, providing translation or intercultural mediation. She also provides psychological and social counselling and works with some clients on a long-term basis.

The Social Welfare Centre (OPS) in Marki actively cooperates with the commune, the police and local NGOs that support migrants. This enables an efficient exchange of information and referral of people in need

to the appropriate OPS when social work and assistance for specific individuals or families is required. This is important when people are in a vulnerable situation and don't know the social support system in Poland. In Marki, specialists working for the well-being of people with a migration background know each other and know that they can contact the Social Welfare Centre and Olena. This means that residents of the city in need of support – migrants – can quickly get the support they need and, most importantly, talk about their difficult situation in their own language³.

Migrants are not always aware of where and how they can get help. Maria Konarzewska points out that not everyone finds it easy to ask for help, especially if they are experiencing difficulties but don't consider their situation to be extremely bad. In her experience, it is important to keep in touch with migrants on various occasions, e.g. when they take part in local events or when parents are in contact with the school. In casual conversations, it is possible to provide important information about what social services, including those provided by the Social Welfare Centre, are available to them and what they need to do to access them.

On the other hand, Anita Fieducik from the school in Izabelin points out that keeping an eye on what is happening to the children and finding out the reasons for longer periods of absence from school also allows you to quickly recognise when their family is facing difficulties and needs support.

³ It is good practice to employ specialists with a migration background in local government institutions, but they need training – they have acquired professional skills in a different country, with a different support system and under different legal regulations. Therefore, migrant employees need to be introduced to the Polish legal and cultural environment so that they can fulfil their duties well. We also know from experience that hiring a person with a migration background requires building intercultural relationships and cultural diversity awareness within the employing institution.

Methods for more effective social work with migrants:



aid organisations should get support from a person who can communicate with migrants in their native language, understands the cultural context and can support the organisation's team in working with the group



cooperation and exchange of information about people who may need support between different actors and organisations working with the migrant community



observing how people with a migration background function, being attentive to their life situation and the possible difficulties they may experience; where appropriate, providing them with information about the availability of various social services.



In 2023, the Polish Migration Forum Foundation published a comprehensive publication '[I am a Mom in Poland](#)' - a set of information for mothers of young children and for pregnant women. It includes tips on pregnancy, childbirth, medical facilities, perinatal care, birth schools and other support available to migrant women. The handbook is available in different languages.

You may also want to take a look at a handbook aimed at migrants with disabilities, which can be downloaded [here](#), and a handbook describing the functioning of the healthcare system in Poland, which can be downloaded [here](#).

Counteracting and responding to discriminatory behaviour

It is better to prevent discrimination earlier than to react to it later on. It is also necessary to pay attention to discriminatory behaviour, which can also occur from the side of migrants. Migrants themselves have different attitudes towards others and may also display different, also negative, behaviour - both towards the Polish community and towards other people with a migration background (from the same or other cultural backgrounds).

Educational activities, promoting attitudes of openness and learning to respond firmly to any negative behaviour - no matter who it is directed at or by - is a task for both schools and cultural centres, as well as local authorities and other public institutions.

Countering discrimination and responding to conflicts that arise requires an understanding of the reasons behind negative behaviour. Sometimes, unintentionally or with good intentions, people might feel excluded. In activities benefiting migrants, one should carefully plan and implement activities which don't cause discord or resentment within the migrant community, which is very diverse.

Martyna Lukaszewska from the Foundation for Freedom and Elmira Abasbekova, an intercultural assistant, highlight the importance of equal treatment for all people from migration and refugee backgrounds. Both of them implement activities at the Centre for Foreigners in Dębak-Podkowa Leśna. They observed a negative impact on relations between different groups living in the centre due to the fact that assistance was directed only to selected groups (e.g. only to people from Afghanistan, then only to people from Ukraine).

It is important to remember that there are people in Poland coming from different places and their life situation and experiences may be different but equally difficult. Those involved in advocacy on behalf of migrants, as well as those dedicated to shaping local migration policies, should take into account the diversity of the migrant community in their communication.

It is also worth noting that before 2022 a large number of Ukrainian children had already been studying in Polish schools and facing similar challenges to their peers who had arrived after the outbreak of full-scale war. These children observed the attention given to the new arrivals and saw differences from their personal experience. For example, children who arrived in 2022 received free clothing, meals or other forms of support such as free classes and trips to cultural centres. Some Ukrainian children, who had already been in the school before, viewed such situations as unfair. It also happened that they were less willing to integrate with their new Ukrainian classmates out of a sense of injustice and unequal treatment.

Tension between Ukrainian migrants has also grown around the native language they speak on a daily basis. Some people from eastern Ukraine speak Russian. Those from the western part of the country often speak Ukrainian on a daily basis. Animosity between children (we also observe it among adults) in relation to the language of communication was quite common among children.

One good practice to support the integration of children that proved successful at the Izabelin school was a workshop led by a psychologist

from the Polish Migration Forum, Julia Walatek, aimed at all Ukrainian children studying at the school (not just those who arrived in 2022). The workshops were inclusive and empowering. They were an opportunity for people from different classes to get to know each other better. The children were satisfied and asked about continuing them. According to the headmistress, the workshops gave the children confidence and made them stronger. The headmistress also observes that Ukrainian pupils and students are more willing to meet in a common place such as the library, where they have a pleasant space in which to spend time and talk.

Elmira Abasbekova highlights an important issue related to the prevention of discrimination and negative behaviour - the monitoring work of those with different migrant and refugee groups under their supervision. Some of the supervisors have had their own difficult experiences. For them, an activity that involves supporting others can be too overwhelming. This in turn can have a negative impact on the quality of work.

Monitoring, providing the necessary psychological support, but also setting clear rules for providing assistance will prevent possible negative behaviour. Examples of such situations could be the articulation of discrimination towards different groups or refusing to speak Russian, even if the person who requests help only speaks this language.

Martyna Łukaszewska emphasises that professional support for people from migration and refugee backgrounds requires preparation for this work and the use of supervision and, if necessary, individual work with a therapist. A similar need is pointed out by Beata Brysiak, who for a year and a half has been running a hotel for people from Ukraine - 'Przystań Nadzieja' in Marki. Supporting the people who use the hotel on a daily basis is very demanding and mentally straining. The opportunity to work with a team of specialists and to benefit from supervision is, in her opinion, very much needed by those running support activities.

Key areas for addressing exclusion and integration of migrants

Based on conversations about how we understand non-exclusion and inclusion, it is possible to identify key areas for the effective inclusion of people with a migration background in the local community:



Equal treatment of people from different countries
- directing aid and support to people who need it, no matter which country they come from.



Professional preparation of those carrying out support activities for migrants, as well as ensuring that they can benefit from regular supervision, and psychological support if needed.



Countering negative and discriminatory behaviour - both from the Polish community and from other people with a migration background.



Building social and friendship relationships (at work, at school, attending various events, being able to enjoy cultural and leisure activities).



Recognising the diversity of the migrant community (different backgrounds and cultural differences and diverse life situations and experiences).



Access to information on the functioning of public services in Poland and the rules of using them - e.g. in health care, social benefits (especially important for people who have a difficult life situation, e.g. people with disabilities). Subsequently, also learning about local customs and matters related to the organisation of life, such as e.g. rules for waste segregation, organisation of public transport.



Guidance on Polish labour law and the functioning of the labour market as well as on working customs and culture. This avoids, on the one hand, that migrants can be victims of abuse and, on the other hand, makes migrants find themselves better in the communities that they join.



The possibility to benefit from social support in the place of residence - above all from other people with a migration background (sometimes family or friends and sometimes strangers, coming from the same country), who can provide basic information about life in the city and in Poland.

Those who have had experience of integration have a good understanding of the differences between life in their place of origin and life in Poland, so their support as guides is particularly valuable for newcomers. Being able to talk freely in their own language is also of great importance.



Promoting entrepreneurship and developing professional skills. In the migrant community, as in any other community, there are more and less entrepreneurial people. Particularly active people are worth involving in local activities - their visibility and vital energy, as well as the contribution and perspective they can bring to various initiatives, will foster the integration of the migrant community as a whole, help develop its potential and support entrepreneurship.

It is also worth highlighting issues that may hinder integration and contribute to the persistence of the difficult life situation of persons with a migration background. Implementing measures aimed at eliminating these factors can support more effective integration and improve the quality of life of these persons.

Exclusion can also mean that people with a migration background don't have the opportunity to do jobs in line with their competences and qualifications. A frequent reason for this is insufficient knowledge of the

Polish language. However, it is also sometimes the case that a barrier is the complicated and costly process of recognising or comparing qualifications and diplomas (in professions that require this - such as teaching or medicine). As a result, highly qualified people who have come to Poland often perform work below their competences or are unable to find any employment.



5. Intercultural assistants, teachers and psychologists - interviews with Maria Konarzewska, Dorota Samsonowicz-Kaczmarek and notes by Julia Walatek and Weronika Brączek

Interview with intercultural assistant Maria Konarzewska

How long have you been living in Poland and what do you do for a living?

I have been living in Poland since 2004. For the past four years I have been working in an elementary school in Marki as a co-educational teacher. I also teach Polish as a foreign language. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, I have been taking care of migrants. At first I was volunteering, but since September 2022 I work as an intercultural assistant.

What does the work involve?

An intercultural assistant creates a bridge between the school, the parents and the child. The most important part of this job is to support the youngest children, helping them integrate into their new environment. My job is to make children from other countries accepted by their peers. It's a difficult job, and without the right skills it can do harm. But it is my passion and a pleasure at the same time. I want migrant children to feel likable and I want them to feel like they're a part of a community. This will help them become better learners and overcome various barriers. But in order for this process to be successful, you have to include them in various activities. It's not enough just to be present in the classroom, so I organize a lot of different events. But not every intercultural assistant can do it - you need to know how to set boundaries not to get burned out.

Do you see the results of your work compared to last year?

Yes. I can feel that the children find themselves better in the school community. To the point that I didn't even want to refer to them as „migrant children“ when I filled out the report. For me, they are a part of our school.

What problems do teachers approach you with?

Mostly with concerns that the child will graduate. Children were first disconnected from regular education by the pandemic, then by the war, and finally they found themselves in another country where a foreign language is spoken. It's hard to get back into the education system after such experiences. That's when I prepare a plan to support both sides. Moreover, students often hear from their parents that they will leave soon, and then they completely lose the motivation to learn.

What are the biggest challenges in your work?

Maybe the fact that I organize everything myself? Although this is my conscious choice. And besides, I have a fair amount of independence in my work and I get a lot of support from the headmaster. Most of the time it is difficult for me to decide which children need help the most. Besides, I never know whether a child will leave or stay here for a long time. In such situations, it's a wild stab in the dark: I give them a promise that I can't keep. So it is difficult to plan any support. You have to do everything quickly and instinctively, so that as many people as possible can benefit from it.

What have you learned in your work so far?

At first I tried to organize separate events for migrants. Then I noticed that this divides people rather than unites them. So I started inviting everyone, both migrants and the local community. Then the latter became curious and eager to participate in integration events.

What would you recommend to future intercultural assistants?

Definitely materials to work with, because it's good to come to children

with something specific. This is motivating for them. Also books, courses on teaching Polish as a foreign language - because many people do it by intuition. I got a lot of support from the school, as they were open to my ideas, and that helped me a lot. A lot of people volunteer: the whole school community participates in my events. That is what makes it possible for me to do all this. People who are to become intercultural assistants often don't know Polish, and I feel like this work becomes very difficult in such situations. Of course, the most important thing is to get along with the child, but if the assistant can't communicate with the teachers, there can be a barrier between them. So I think that all assistants should know Polish. In addition, you need to take the child's parents into consideration, because they also need support.

What gives you the most satisfaction?

The fact that the children feel at home. And their smiles. It's the same when you come to someone's house as a guest: if that person is distant towards you, you feel insecure and want to leave as soon as possible. But if they make you feel at home, you are happy to stay.

Trauma and its impact on children and parents - notes by Julia Walatek from a meeting with parents

Julia Walatek is a psychologist who works with the Polish Migration Forum Foundation. As part of the **"Welcome Neighbour!"** project she led integration and support workshops for children with a migration background and a meeting for parents about how they could support their children to better adapt in a new place and situation.

Julia shared her thoughts on working with migrant families from these meetings.



The initial focus of the meeting for parents of migrant children was supposed to be the motivation of children to learn. It happened that children found it difficult to find motivation for school-related work.

This was influenced by many different factors. Firstly, quite a few children had experienced the trauma of the war in Ukraine. After arriving in Poland, they had to find their way in the new reality, carrying this trauma inside them all the time. They felt pressure from their parents or school to adapt quickly to the new environment.

Parents also found themselves in a similar situation. They were stressed about finding a place to live and work in a new country to keep their children safe. Often they did not have the energy within themselves to provide other support to their children, hoping that since their children were attending school, had somewhere to live and something to eat, all their needs were met.

So we started talking about what it means to provide care and give a sense of security for children. It turned out that it was not only about responding to basic needs, i.e. shelter and food, but also about being listened to and understood.

Parents often did not know why their child started to behave differently: usually polite and quiet, he or she became impulsive and explosive. We pointed out that such behaviour is typical in cases of trauma. Cognitive functions are disrupted, so the nervous system has to defend itself somehow. Thus, new behaviours can emerge that are simply a defence against negative emotions.



We wondered what can be done to get a child ,back together'. We looked for answers to the most difficult questions, as well as for solutions to find the way to one another: parent-child, child-parent. The most important conclusion was that every parent tries the best they can for their children. However, it is important to also take care of oneself as a parent - for one's own psycho-physical health, and furthermore to be understanding towards each other, try to talk and try to listen, to ask questions and wait for answers, and above all, to seek specialist help if it is needed.

At the Polish Migration Forum you can sign up to a psychologist.
You can sign up for appointments at: +48 22 255 22 02



Supporting one another

At the school in Izabelin, the headmistress noticed that the Ukrainian children spent little time together. This could be due, among other things, to the fact that they were setting up a defence mechanism, isolating themselves from each other. Maybe, for example, they did not want to talk or think about the war any more, because that was the only thing they associated with contact with their Ukrainian peers. So she decided to organise integration workshops. Through them, the children learned to look to each other for support.

When working with children, it is very important at the very beginning of the workshop to create a space



where children feel safe. It is necessary to build up their trust, because only then they will open up. This is difficult to build in a single meeting. It is therefore important that such activities are planned for the long term and on a regular basis, following a prior internal (school) needs analysis.

A conversation with Dorota Samsonowicz-Kaczmarek, a teacher of language Polish as a foreign language

What do you do on a daily basis?

For many years, my interests and education have focused on education. I am a teacher by profession, with a master's degree in classical philology. I have always enjoyed gaining knowledge, so after my master's degree I expanded my knowledge at postgraduate and doctoral studies at the University of Warsaw. For me, the time of studying was also a time of publication. Among other things, I published a textbook for the study of ancient Greek, as well as articles on social and cultural issues of teaching Latin.

Curiosity of the world, openness to new experiences and my ability to observe have helped me to travel - to reach and explore six continents. My greatest interest turned out to be African nature, which I explored for over ten years in various national parks in Africa. I summed up my peregrinations with a travel report titled Big Five.

My studies gave me the opportunity to work as a teacher - both in high school and college. I have more than 21 years of experience. They also prepared me to gain experience in other professions. I worked in the information and communications departments at the Ministry of Education

for seven years. I've been working for INSTOM sp. z o.o. for eight years now, and I am not only running their marketing department, but I am also in charge of internships and apprenticeships for people from technical and polytechnical schools.

When did your cooperation with the Polish Migration Forum Foundation begin?

I worked with the Foundation from September 2022 to December 2023.

Where did the people you taught come from?

The groups I taught were very diverse. The largest number of participants came from Ukraine, but there were also people from Chechnya, India, the Netherlands, Tajikistan, Russia, Zimbabwe and Panama. They represented a variety of professions: finance, accounting, journalism, computer science, medicine, as well as police officers and craftsmen. All of them were very polite, engaged in learning and grateful. Some classes were also attended by children.

What did the classes look like?

I've always tried to cover topics that the students were interested in. Of course, the classes were based on morphology and syntax, but with some people I had to work more on articulation. However, I've always tried to approach all participants individually, look for their motivation to learn and know their interests. Thus, the participants, although very diverse, showed a very open and friendly approach to each other. For example, one man from India was passionate about photography, so we dedicated one class to this area. Someone else was interested in architecture, so we went out for a walk in Podkowa Leśna and explored wooden villas from the early 20th century, brick manor houses and art deco buildings. We also went shopping together, for example to a grocery store, where everyone could ask or buy something on their own.

There were also situations that surprised me, such as when someone who was celebrating a holiday typical of their culture brought candy for the whole group. On the last class in December we discussed Christmas traditions and holiday customs known to Christians, and there was an unusual atmosphere of curiosity and friendliness between people from different religions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism). One person even cried from emotion.

That must have been quite challenging...

Yes, it was a challenge - an extremely interesting and inspiring one. It gave me a lot of positive energy, which I put into teaching Polish language and introducing our culture. There were times when simple things were difficult. One time, two women from Ukraine pointed out to me the pronunciation of our greeting „dzień dobry.” They asked me why some people entering a store or a doctor’s clinic don’t say „dzień dobry” but „dzieeeeń doooobry.” At first I couldn’t understand what they meant. They were persistent and acted out the scene. And then it became clear: this melodious greeting with long vowels happens quite often when we speak. This is how people speak, when they are full of emotion and optimism. We say this to someone we know well and when we’re happy to see them.

I didn’t realize this earlier. In general, Polish pronunciation for speakers of a language other than from the Slavic language group is very difficult, so some might twist a word. Often before we understand each other, it can be funny. Sometimes the same words mean something completely different in Ukrainian and Polish, for example, „igraszki” is Ukrainian for „toys,” but in Polish we use the word in a different context.

Learning Polish helps people find their way in our society and feel a part of it. Not knowing the language can be a serious barrier to making contacts, as well as to finding a job. That’s why I also taught people how to write a proper resume and a convincing cover letter. Some people managed to find a job during the course, which we celebrated together.

Is learning Polish as difficult as it is commonly believed?

It is easy for people from Ukraine to learn to speak our language, but it is much more difficult with writing. I think it is definitely harder for people whose native language is not from the Slavic language group. But, of course, it is not impossible. Those who have participated since the beginning of the course have made very good progress. Those who could already speak Polish were able to read books at the last stage of the course, and those who started from scratch were able to communicate, and their interpersonal skills improved a lot.

What was the most difficult thing for you during the course?

At first I was a little intimidated by the age diversity, but it soon became apparent that the children were doing great, and even supported the rest of the group. The students spoke Polish to varying degrees, so it wasn't easy for me to maintain the same level of teaching. The only thing I could do was to make sure everyone was equally engaged in learning.

What was the most difficult part? Once a woman from Russia participated in a class. She said something controversial before telling everyone more about herself and confessing that she was a political refugee. Everyone knew she was from Russia, because during the introduction, everyone gave their names and their countries of origin. This situation occurred when the participants answered some questions about what their dreams are and what they would like to do in the near future. One Ukrainian woman said she wanted the war to end as soon as possible so she could return to her country. Then the Russian woman spoke up and said, „Not too soon.” At that time, the war had already been going on for almost a year. I was afraid that a conflict would arise between the women. All the participants looked at the Russian woman and she once again stressed that the war is going to last a long time, but she said it with sadness and told everyone what she knew, whom she knew and whom she helped. After this statement, she found understanding and became a part of the group.

What gave you the greatest satisfaction?

Children - their gratitude. Adults - their respect for my profession. It is different to teach in a state school and in such a diverse group. I feel that here we support each other more, we respect each other a lot. In schools you have to fight for authority, while here it is a given. It's natural, you don't have to fight for it.

Intercultural integration at school – notes from a workshop by Weronika Brączek

Weronika Brączek works at the Polish Migration Forum Foundation and on a daily basis conducts activities directed at women's support, including pregnant women and mothers of young children. As part of the '**Welcome Neighbour!**' project, she led intercultural workshops for children in the grades 4-7 at Izabelin Primary School.



There are many stereotypes and preconceptions that we take from our surroundings. The process of changing them should take place not only at school, but at every possible level, including at home or in the neighbourhood, because only then can the change happen naturally without any pressure. Moreover, intercultural education should involve children and young people as well as their parents, teachers, the school management and the whole local community within which the school functions. It should be an unhurried and long-term process, focused on dialogue and mutual understanding.



When working on inclusion at school, it is worth involving the whole school community - not just the individual classes that take part in the workshop. Then openness and sensitivity to diversity can form on a day-to-day basis, step by step, corresponding to the needs of the whole community and not just a particular group.

When activities are associated with compulsion and they are an exception in the daily routine, e.g. once a year, there can be a misunderstanding about the importance of the learning. When children return to their homes, to their environment in which they function on a daily basis, they often do not have the chance to put into practice what they have learned at school. It is for this reason that the drive for change should also apply to adults. The whole school administration should be involved in developing integration strategies and implementing them in school together with the children.

One important issue in the integration process is the inclusion of migrant pupils in various activities, but as „experts“. These children are usually seen as migration specialists, but that is not the only thing that defines them. They can also be characterised by something they enjoy doing, something they feel comfortable with and something they find interesting - something they have influence on. It is worth looking for solutions and suggestions that migrant children can bring to their community - taking into account their favourite activities, e.g. sports games, art workshops, or cooking together

6. About the organizers

The Polish Migration Forum Foundation

The Polish Migration Forum Foundation has been supporting migrants in Poland since 2007. We strive to ensure that their rights are respected and that Poland is a country where people of different religions and cultures can live in harmony and with respect. We help everyone, regardless of nationality, language of communication, religion or other factors.

We see migration as a natural and permanent part of today's world. We know that it will increase in the coming decades due to current and future conflicts, but also as a result of climate change. The experience of migration can be difficult, both for the migrants and the communities that host them. At times, it raises concerns and arouses emotions. That's why we believe in a two-track approach: we help our new guests find themselves in a new reality, while supporting Poles in the process of creating communities where everyone feels comfortable.

Building diverse communities and a sense of security in a dynamically changing reality is, in our view, the greatest global challenge of the near future.

This publication is a set of experiences and good practices that we have developed together with the Foundation for Freedom and the communes of Marki, Izabelin and Podkowa Leśna as part of a project called „Welcome Neighbor! Integration of migrants in local communities” funded from a grant from the Active Citizens Fund – Regional program funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through the EEA grants.

The Foundation for Freedom

The Foundation for Freedom is an independent, non-profit organisation.

Foreigners are at the centre of our interests and towards them that we address most of our important activities. The Foundation promotes diversity of cultures and world views. They work for the integration and improvement of people with refugee and a migration background, women and other groups at risk of exclusion.

Physical activity is one of the most underrated tools for social change. Sport plays an important cultural role and provides a sense of belonging. Shared passion, emotions and universal rules create natural conditions for combining them with educational activities. At the Foundation, they primarily use football to break down prejudices and find a common language for different groups. In their activities, they emphasise the principles of fair play and show ways to counteract discrimination. Since 2010, they have been organising Etnoliga - an open, free football league for people aged 16+, smaller and larger tournaments, football training for children and young people and other events.

One of the greatest challenges of modern times is the integration of migrants. More and more people all over the world, for various reasons, are seeking a new home. Their proper functioning in a new country is hindered by cultural, linguistic, legal and psychological barriers. At the Foundation, they strive to help the most vulnerable - children from refugee families. Their activities are designed to comprehensively strengthen children's potential, sense of security and chances of proper development. The programme 'Przystanek Światlica', which combines group activities and individual work with the children and families, operates in the Podkowa Leśna-Dębak and Linin centres (in the years 2012-2021 in the Warszawa-Targówek centre) . In addition, since 2022, responding to the needs of families with young children, they have launched the Day Care Centre for Young Children (at the Polish Migration Forum's headquarters, at 137 Górczewska Street), which provides the youngest children aged 3-7, who are outside the preschool and

school system, with a safe and attractive place to play and develop. During this time, their parents or guardians can attend counselling, look for a job or a flat, or carry out other tasks to take care of themselves and their family in Poland.

A key actor for the success of the Foundation's efforts is the attitude of Poles towards foreigners. This is why they place great emphasis on intercultural education. They involve Polish citizens in joint activities for people with a migration background, but also teach local leaders, educators and trainers how to change their environment to foster tolerance and integration. Every year they visit around a hundred Warsaw primary schools with a programme of intercultural workshops.

They offer support to teachers, educators and tutors of in-school and out-of-school institutions in providing training on the methods and contexts of working with a multicultural classroom. Since 2023, five of Warsaw's educational and environmental institutions have been regularly visited by the Foundation's intercultural educators, who, by participating in the existing programme or conducting their own educational and integration activities, support the team-building process in a diverse group of participants. They are also an additional support for the teaching staff in responding to the individual needs of their pupils.

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coordination: Justyna Różańska, Weronika Regosz